

Birds of the Industrial Revolution

They must have come out of the sky like ordinary swans, but we missed their majestic landing on our little lake because we were “fast asleep” as they say in the fairy tales.

In the morning, though, we couldn't take our eyes off them: nineteen beautiful black swans gliding like so many free-born shadows on water they scarcely disturbed.

Once our tiny Midlands town of Marley was awake and aware of the arrival of the swans, we shed a certain poverty of the imagination that had clung to us heretofore. If what we were seeing was possible, then all things were possible.

When we could get away from our work or daily routines, we watched them as they moved about - so willingly, so wantonly. It wasn't too much to think that they came here out of a dream, but difficult to express to a neighbor for fear of being thought a romantic idiot.

They were creatures from a different world, and we were like men and women walking on the sea floor. We searched for words to describe them, and when none presented themselves, we were grateful.

Clearly the aesthetics of our little town had changed, but there was more to follow – much more. It began when the Express and Star published a front page article about our swans and the mystery of their provenance, with a picture above the fold! It's not much of a paper, granted, but there in black white (and gray) was our new-found glory!

The very next day a reporter and a photographer from the Guardian arrived in their own video truck. They commandeered (with permission) the second floor veranda of the Harrington Hotel and shot copious amounts of film. They couldn't have asked for a more beautiful day and the swans were magnificent, for they were exploring their new home, or so we hoped.

The Guardian footage made the BBC evening news program on Channel 4. We were excited, glassy-eyed and delirious with fame! Then the hotel obliged our delirium by playing a continuous loop of the video in its spacious lobby. The BBC logo at the start of the news segment, and the anchor's familiar face and voice, provided reassurance to all the people of Marley that this was news in all of Britain!

On the very next morning, about half-ten, the first busload of tourists arrived, and they were ecstatic when they saw the swans. In the afternoon, around two, another busload of happy amateur photographers arrived. Overnight we were a point of interest; we were a destination!

Before long we believed that the fabulous goose that laid the golden egg had been reincarnated in a flock of swans! The hotel and the three B&Bs in town were suddenly booked solid for the next two weekends.

The hotel restaurant added more tables on the second floor veranda, and every teenager who wanted a job was pressed into service busing or waiting on tables. There was not a better spot in town for eating, drinking and watching the swans, the manager trumpeted. Binoculars provided on request!

With ungodly speed and business acumen, our merchants prepared for the expected onslaught of tourists. The Mermaid Pub replaced its weathered sign with a colorful 8 by 10 - foot heraldry version of a black swan, and hung it over the front door. The bar napkins were likewise changed in short order.

The Claremont, not to be outdone, turned their little used video game room into a nicely lit lounge for whiskey, beer and wine-tasting. (Cigar smoking on the back porch!) They brought in a popular dance band from Manchester and provided the musicians with a deluxe double-wide trailer parked within walking distance, and free food and drink when not on duty.

Myself, I moved in with my brother Tom, in his two-bedroom house outside of town, and rented out my town flat for 140 Pounds the weekend! I split the take with Tom, well, because he's always been like a brother to me!

We couldn't see any end to it. Tourists were flooding in just to be watching the swans and then wandering about town, not leaving. The bakery was churning out chocolate swan sugar cookies and swan scones.

One day a charming little girl about six years old was walking in the square with no parents in sight. She had a helium-filled swan balloon floating aloft, tied to her wrist with ribbon in a bow. After we made eye contact, we said good morning and smiled at each other; then she said what was on her mind.

"Is there a troll living under that bridge?" she asked.

I held up two fingers.

"Two?" she said. "How do they get along?"

"Not very well I'm afraid, a brother and sister!"

"May I see them, please?"

"They are very green from the algae and mold, and they weren't very good looking to begin with. They would rather just be left alone."

"Oh, thank you. Bye!"

Of course there appeared stuffed, "ultra-soft", plush baby swans for sale in the hotel and two other shops. How did it all happen so quickly? We sell out every weekend! No matter, everyone is happy because the swans are real, and life is good.

We were like extras in a successful venture. Something like Field of Dreams Baseball Park in Iowa, but we didn't have to build anything!

Early on I did a bit of research on the computer in the library and put together a two-fold brochure on black swans. We didn't share these with the tourists. No, they were crib sheets for us! In a few weeks, most of Marley's adults were resident experts, and the teachers taught eager children to be good-will ambassadors for the town.

The male swans are called "cobs" and the females "pens," did you know? A group of black swans in flight is known as a "wedge" and a group on the ground is called a "bank". They have waxy red beaks and reddish eyes and their feet and legs are black. Their young are cygnets, and they look like down-covered balls of soot as fledglings.

"Sometimes, when the cobs and pens swim in deep water", we tell them, "a fledgling will get to ride on the back of the parent!" It is something to see! (Although we've yet to see it ourselves) There are posters for sale that show a cygnet riding atop the downy back of its mother or father. Yes, they are selling very well, indeed!

We tell everyone that the swans are from Australia, and the state flag of Western Australia features a black swan. It is a known fact that they wander extensively in response to droughts, and there have been fires and extreme heat in Western Australia, while our part of England has had an extremely wet winter and spring. It makes a good story, and some part of it may even be true!

In a follow-up Guardian article, I read that some overly wealthy people with huge estates, have purchase swans from Australia or New Zealand and had them shipped here to live on their grounds like peacocks. I read that it is an offense under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981, to release or allow this species to escape into the wild.

And yet, and yet, we have just around twenty right here within sight and nobody knows how they got here! We all feel like smart old birds ourselves, and the tourists, our "out of town guests," give us credit for outsmarting the toffs and the environmental bureaucrats as well.

Things were going swimmingly, (forgive the pun) but, of course some oddities began to present themselves.

For example, a certain gentleman has taken up residence in the hotel, and he let it be known that he has given up his job in Chelsea and left his wife and children in order stay in Marley and "become one of us." He looks upon us as "charmed" and he wants to be the same.

He reminds me of Paul Gauguin who left his family in Paris to go live and paint in Tahiti. Tahiti yes, but Marley?

Another example: One day, some small children under ten were left alone for several hours and allowed to amuse themselves, which they did by going to and from the playground to the toy store, to the sweet shop, and a grassy hill for rolling. They enjoyed their freedom to such an extent that they refused to get back on the bus to go home. Instead, they ran back to the playground, locked arms and had to have their little fingers pried from the merry-go-round and the swings, with much screaming and hot tears in abundance!

Young adults, especially couples, who can't afford the hotel, have been spending the night in their cars, and then they are seen walking about holding hands and making out here, there and everywhere. They apparently have enough money to buy padlocks and bicycle locks and then lock them to the black iron railings on the side of the bridge facing the weir and its waterfalls. Those locks are a pledge of undying love, and as the sun sets and the swans send out their muted love calls, there is a palpable feeling of romance on both sides of the bridge.

A curiosity: Our three small thrift shops are suddenly selling out of anything that might be used to remind someone of their time in Marley, and I mean anything: salt and pepper shakers, pickle and relish dishes, pull toys etc., and one feels that these meaningless items would become family heirlooms because of their origin in Romantic Marley of the Swans. Garage sale items are in demand, and anything left beside a trash bin, will become a memento if it isn't too shabby.

In order to assert their identity, some of our more idiosyncratic locals, have loudly denied the importance of the birds' arrival in the town, and tried to debunk the mystery of their origins, etc. The visitors take these characters at face value and they are not the least bit disturbed by their outbursts. Here in Marley everyone does not sing from the same hymnal, nor look at the world with anything like unanimity. So be it!

There is a bend in the river where a grist mill from the 19th century stands, wheel and all frozen in time. The swans like to gather there at night. There used to be a huge flock of noisome Canadian geese living there, but they seem to have disappeared the same night the swans arrived. That is very odd in itself, but no one cares where the geese went or why.

One Thursday afternoon the entire flock of Swans left Marley altogether. It came as a shock to everyone. They were lovely to look as they left, but when they did not return immediately, we began to sweat. Our weekend guests were also upset. One asked me:

“Where did the swans go?”

“We don't have any idea.”

“Why not? You live here don't you?”

“Yes, we do, but their comings and goings are a mystery to us as well. They are wild creatures you know.”

“Yes, but we rented a suite of rooms for the weekend just to see the swans, and the children will be upset.”

We were relieved when those guests left town and the swans returned on Monday.

I have known a man named Tom Larkin for many years; his two sons played football with my boys, and I often spoke with him at their games or whenever I saw him on the street or in one of our three pubs. He lives out on the peninsula with his wife, and I know him to be an honest, thoughtful man.

He came over to my table in the Shady Spot as I was finishing my traditional fried breakfast. He asked, did I mind if he sat with me a bit, and of course I said no.

He looked distracted, gazing out the window at some tree branch bending in the breeze. With thoughts composed, he looked back at me and spoke: "I'm sure I've mentioned or maybe bragged about my two German shorthair pointers, Hans and Inga."

"Yah", I said, with my best German accent. "Go on." I was anticipating a good hunting story with a chase or unusual outcome.

"I wasn't sleeping well the other night, so I got up before dawn and let the dogs out to have a walk-about, you know, to tire myself out a bit. We walked from my place up to the grist mill, and the dogs ran ahead and I heard them splashing in the water like pups.

There was enough of a moon for me to see the light hit the white water they were kicking up, and then I saw some dark figures. Shadows like. Maybe four or five black swans swimming right toward the dogs. They were hissing and whistling, and they spread out their wings like cormorants, (gesturing) only these wings were six feet across and held very high! The wings made a loud beating and then, when the birds began honking, I felt a kind of sick fear in my stomach.

Both dogs, and these have been duck hunting with me many times, and barely blink at a shotgun blast, come flying out of the water like frightened sheep and they ran right past me. In truth, I turned and ran myself, and nearly passing them before we got in the house and locked the door." He paused with his elbow on a chair back and his chin resting in his hand.

"Well, "what do you make of it now in the cold light of day?" I asked.

"The swans might have been sleeping when we got near the mill, and the awful racket the dogs made must have given them quite a start, but I don't really think there was any fear in them. They were more like a pack of jackals, ready for a fight with a lion or an elephant. Their eyes, and it may have been my over active imagination, but their eyes were red, a decidedly demonic red. I'll never forget that, day or night.

After we were safely home, I wished I had brought my shotgun with me. But now, in the clear cold light of day, I'm glad I didn't. If I had opened up on them and killed one or two, or only wounded some of them. I believe they would have killed me. Swear to God."

"The swans?" He nodded and just said, "Aye."

Another fellow in town, Tom Dumphy, a decent, bookish sort of bloke, who only reads non-fiction, and is a teetotaler, told me he was out fishing at night in a boat with a light he'd attached to the gunnel to shine on the water to attract fish. He had a favorite spot not far from the grist mill, and he dropped anchor there and waited for company. He didn't have long to wait.

"Maybe they were attracted to the light, or maybe it annoyed them. Either way, the swans came right out to where I was and swam around very near the boat, hissing and honking with menace."

And when he told me that the look in their eyes were "murderous," his face was ashen.

He went on: "I immediately started up the engine, but they weren't afraid of the sound of it at all, and I had to glide slowly through them for fear they wouldn't get out of the way and I might hit

one. Once I was clear, I didn't look back. And I won't go back in the bloody daytime either, not until they're gone."

I went to university for a number of years, and that set me apart from many of the people I grew up with. I took care not to flaunt my education or to use big words when a simpler ones will do. I stick to sports, national and local, and beg off commenting on anything international as beyond my ken. You would think me quite provincial if we spoke, but you wouldn't mistake me for a superstitious man.

We're after making celebrities of ourselves for living in Marley, and we know it is all because of the swans. We don't want to think anything bad about them. We'd rather doubt the word of our friends.

It's not forbidden to go near the grist mill, and people do like to picnic there because it is a beauty spot with a view of the town over water. A fellow not from the town was in a pub and he told about his visit there, and he said he heard the mill wheel turning and saw it as well! I've been inside, and the machinery is fixed forever in rust, of a color and shade not unlike dried blood. It is hard not to call it to mind, it is so vivid even now.

So, what is a logical man to make of it all? I'd say that fear is almost palpable even for a reasonable man. Stay away from the place, and don't talk of it. The grist mill or the swans, or both together. The last time I tried to say something the least bit profound on the subject, I stopped in mid-sentence and shook my head. There was a cold draft on my spine and my strong right hand was shaking as I grabbed my pint.

After the Christmas holidays the weather went frigid and there were fewer tourists to be seen. Some locals were in the Punch and Judy, talking of killing the swan that laid the golden egg. It wasn't a metaphor. We are all sick of the changes in town, they said, and many in the room nodded and said, "Bloody well right!" Another raised his voice: "We've lost our integrity, our authenticity, and yes, driving off the swans would put an end to it." With the help of alcohol-fueled bravado, a "hunting party" was formed – all men, of course, and all drunk. They sailed to the waters just off the grist mill in three good sized boats.

As good as their word, the men fired on the first swans they saw. They were charcoal grey with yellow on their upper bills. They were nesting and had fledglings to protect. The hunters left their bodies where they lay, but took a few eggs. There were no black swans to be found.

A few locals had already petitioned the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to have them look into the aggressiveness of the swans, and they arrived to take possession of the bodies and the eggs. Some technicians with nets and tranquilizer guns came two days later, set out in a military style boat, and captured two females, gathered their eggs and accidentally killed a male.

The tabloids on Fleet Street in London picked up the story and sent photographers and reporters around. They wrote stories saying that two lab technicians who'd examined the birds and eggs had developed respiratory illnesses which might be bird flu or Legionnaires Disease, or Lyme disease. There was talk that the town was to be quarantined. There were to be no more hunting parties.

Then we learned that the black swans had appeared over a small beach at tip of the peninsula, where some children, mostly pre-teen and younger, were wading next to the jetty. It began raining suddenly, and some of the children were walking around in it, paying no mind whatsoever, laughing and playing, when the birds flew in close, honking and whistling. The children all set about screaming and running and falling, and throwing rocks at the birds that may have hit other children. The swans “came with the storm” one of the adults said.

There were injuries that required sewing up, abrasions, a cut that turned out to be a bite. That one, the youngest, most seriously injured, developed a fever and welts. He went in a coma, regained consciousness, then went back into a coma. Not long after this incident, the entire flock took to the air high over the grist mill and flew south – back to Australia we told ourselves.

Men in Hazmat suits sand-blasted the grist mill, or steam cleaned it, or something else. They took water and soil samples, and when they came back a week later they brought heavy equipment and scraped off a foot of topsoil and then trucked it away. All this without a word to the good people of Marley – the luckiest townspeople in England.

Rumor had it that the grist mill was to be taken apart piece by piece and buried somewhere, but the order, if there was one, was later withdrawn. It is still in one piece but no picnickers go near it now.

Epilogue: A Preface from Hell

Marley of the Swans exists no more. It’s withdrawn into itself like a curmudgeon nursing a life-long grudge. Nobody speaks of the magical little kingdom that once was, or our great reversal of fortune. The word “swan” has been stricken from our vocabularies it seems. Now the inhabitants speak only of the weather, gardening or “the greatest game” - football.

As for me, I’ve developed an obligation to myself to be myself. Therefore I am compelled to follow my intellectual curiosity wherever it leads me. But this is your opportunity to break off from this narrative, or risk unpleasantness. From here on, you signed on.

I used the computer in the library to access the Nexis database. It indexes every word in more than 20,000 newspapers and magazines from around the world. Marley’s residents absorb the access fees through their taxes, and I am quite sure they would want me to make good use of the service if I were curious about anything at all. My search terms were three: England, poison and swans. There isn’t much time left for you to avert your eyes!

My most important find was the first document to come up – an avian horror story set in the West Midlands, northwest of Birmingham, not far from us. This area has been called “Black Country” since the Industrial Revolution. That’s when a 30-foot-thick coal seam was discovered very close to the surface and running on for miles.

Recently the residents of the town of Oldbury had their worst fears confirmed. Their own small lake, ominously named, “Rattlechain Lagoon,” had somehow caused the deaths of some 1,200 migrating dabbling ducks, geese and swans, they were told. The bodies of the birds had been

found on the banks or in the water of the lagoon over several years' time, and had quickly been disposed of. A local environmental activist sounded the alarm but he was roundly ignored. Then, after another lethal incident, scientists from the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) were brought in to investigate.

Their post mortem tests detected white phosphorus (WP) in the gizzards of the birds. The scientists hypothesized that the feeding waterfowl were ingesting small particles of the highly toxic, incendiary munition "stored" in the bottom of the shallow lake. The autopsies could not identify any other likely cause of death.

Still-living birds found near the lagoon were observed repeatedly drinking water, shaking and rolling their heads, vomiting blood, exhibiting bouts of diarrhea, and finally convulsing in death. The scientists from the VLA dosed ordinary farm-reared mallards with white phosphorus, and they showed nearly identical behavioral symptoms. How thorough.

White phosphorous (WP) is a highly flammable material which ignites when it comes into contact with oxygen. It is toxic by ingestion and a dose of between 50 to 100 mg – the same as 10 to 20 granules of white sugar – is enough to kill a human being.

The area's chemical history is of note. It began in 1851 when Arthur Albright Willmet and John Edward Goodman began manufacturing white phosphorus for the match industry. In Oldbury, these entrepreneurs found a plentiful supply of coal needed for production, and an abundance of cheap labor to work in the plants. Unfortunately, white phosphorus was poisonous to the match makers.

This was made clear in 1888, when some 1,400 women and girls, called "match girls" refused to go to work in a London plant. The strike was called to protest poor working conditions "including fourteen-hour work days, poor pay, excessive fines and the severe health complications of working with white phosphorus."

The most horrifying of these "severe health complications" was "Phossy jaw," or more formally, phosphorus necrosis of the jaw.

In each case, the victim begin suffering painful toothaches and swelling of the gums. Then the jaw bone begins to abscess. In the dark, the affected bones glow with a greenish-white tinge, called chemiluminescence. The ingested WP is glowing as it makes contact with the oxygen being inhaled.

As the dying bone tissue rots away, it is accompanied by a foul-smelling discharge. Only surgical removal of the afflicted jaw bones could save the patient; otherwise, serious brain damage would ensue and then death from organ failure.

The Goodman and Willmet chemical plant in Oldbury produced phosphorus-derived chemicals from 1851 to 1951, and Rattlechain Lagoon was used as a toxic waste dump throughout that period. No dumping records were maintained, however. Two books written about the company's history failed to mention the lagoon, or the disposal of waste.

Early in World War II, Britain greatly feared a German invasion, so it developed a white phosphorus grenade as an anti-tank weapon. By 1941, well over 6,000,000 had been manufactured, each containing 8 ounces of white phosphorus and an impact fuse.

When the war ended without the German invasion, the grenades were seen as obsolete and dangerous. Many were supposedly destroyed in 1948, and many others were sunk in Rattlechain Lagoon. An unknown number of Molotov cocktails containing white phosphorus were also dumped in the lagoon.

Although the local authorities knew about the history of toxic dumping in the lake, permission was granted for a modern housing estate to be built on land next to the poisoned body of water in 1993.

At no stage were home buyers informed about what was buried in that lake. Today there are hazardous waste signs on the main gate. One resident complained: "Not only do we face financial ruin because we will never be able to sell the house, but our garden literally backs onto the lake so we are terrified for the health of our young children."

Tell it to the match girls!

The End