

Introduction: *Gone to Earth*

An embodiment of that myth of foreigners, the English gentleman, the gentle Englishman. I will not kill; to hide I am ashamed. So I endure without object.

—Rogue Male

At the heart of the prototypical Geoffrey Household tale is a wilderness lair, often a cave, where a hunted man seeks sanctuary from his pursuers. In Household's best-known novel *Rogue Male*, the story's narrator has painstakingly enlarged his cave from a rabbit hole in the sandstone bank bordering a sunken lane hidden under thick hedges in the Dorset countryside. At his most desperate moment, imprisoned by an implacable pursuer and suffocating in the accumulated fumes of his own excrement, he confides to his journal:

Space I have none. The inner chamber is a tumbled morass of wet earth which I am compelled to use as a latrine. I am confined to my original excavation, the size of three large dog kennels, where I lie on or inside my sleeping bag. . . . Now luck, movement, wisdom, and folly have all stopped. Even time has stopped, for I have no space.

The trapped man has left our world for the timeless allegorical realm—underlined by his own namelessness and that of the man he chose to hunt—of Kafka's burrow. Now, with a hint of the cave mysticism of Empedocles, his bolt-hole will become a place

of incubation where his metamorphosis into an animal makes possible the birth of his true self.

At the same time as it neatly conflates the rules of the herd with those of human society, this book's title (and its hero's sole sobriquet) lays down the blueprint for many of Household's subsequent works: through circumstances not of his own making, a man becomes the quarry either of bad men or of society's representatives, or both at the same time. In the course of a relentless and deadly chase he must flee civilization into nature, where he is forced to live like the *wodwose*, the mythical wild man of the woods. The climax is typically a duel between the pursued man and his equally matched adversary, who swap roles of hunter and hunted until the protagonist rises heroically from the bottom to successfully dispatch his opposite number. Even the lesser and more reflexive examples of this writer's unique genre (the label "wilderness procedural" doesn't quite do it justice) never fail to capture the vivid immediacy of the chase and its natural setting.

Notable also is the attractive character, effortlessly conveyed by Household, of his protagonist, who is typically a "Latinised Englishman." The bicultural identity of this fictional alter ego results from genes (the Ecuadorian-English Claudio Howard-Wolferstan of *Fellow Passenger*, the Basque-English eponymous hero of *The Lives and Times of Bernardo Brown*), upbringing (Owen Dawnay, Argentinian-born English botanist of *Dance of the Dwarfs*), costume and cosmetics (the narrator of *Rogue Male* in its concluding pages), or simply personal inclination (Household himself). The common denominator among these men of wildly different class and ethnic background is the practice (as Household noted in his 1958 autobiography *Against the Wind*) of "courtesy between man and man whatever the difference in education and income." All belong to that elite category—determined by code of honor, spirit of fellowship, and an indefinable *joie de vivre*—identified as "Class X" by the narrator of *Rogue*

Male, who reflects in the course of his deadly hide-and-seek scramble across the English countryside:

I should like some socialist pundit to explain to me why it is that in England a man can be a member of the proletariat by every definition of the proletariat (that is, by the nature of his employment and his poverty) and yet obviously belong to Class X, and why another can be a bulging capitalist or cabinet minister or both and never get nearer to Class X than being directed to the Saloon bar if he enters the Public.

The first and most notable member of this international brotherhood was a real Spaniard whom Household encountered in his early days as a commercial traveler. After sharing a table and a few liters of wine in a Toledo café, he discovered that this "citizen of Christian birth and exquisite breeding who did not find it necessary to wear a collar and tie" had secretly paid the bill upon leaving. Such an act of quiet courtesy from a person of very limited means struck Household deeply, leading him to a small epiphany of unity with Spain and a decision to make the acquisition of "courtliness" his personal goal. This moment of solidarity would burgeon into a unity with a cosmopolitan league of Class Xers—dashing, often raffish, always courtly *pícaros*, from Polish aristocrats to black Cuban taxi drivers—whom Household would meet again and again in his travels through Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America (north of Mexico the count drops sharply) during a peripatetic life that clearly informed the picaresque structure of his fiction.

Born in Bristol at the turn of the last century, Geoffrey Household was the son of a lawyer who later became secretary of education for Gloucestershire. There were family memories of Bilney, the estate in Norfolk his merchant great-grandfather had acquired and his grandfather lost. At Magdalen College, Oxford, where he

took a double First in Classics and English and aspired to be a poet, he also claims to have shared with a friend “an almost oriental dislike of any intellectual, athletic, political or social activities.” Noting this quality in the young man along with his keen interest in shooting, the friend’s father (clearly an early member of the club) offered Geoffrey a post in the Ottoman Bank in Bucharest, an experience that first awakened in him “the civilized European who lies, half a litre below the surface, in the average introverted Englishman.”

After Bucharest, Household became a representative for Elders & Fyffes, banana vendors for the United Fruit Company, which led him to his deep encounter with Spain, chiefly in Bilbao and the Basque country, whose inhabitants were to figure frequently in his fictions. He met and married a Romanian-born American, Elisaveta Kopelanoff, who encouraged his first attempts at writing. After a stint in New York rewriting articles for a children’s encyclopedia, then in London writing children’s historical plays for the BBC, he advertised himself, accurately and memorably, as an “Englishman with no national prejudices” and was hired by the printer’s ink manufacturers John Kidd & Co., who sent him first to the Middle East and then to his last great regional love affair, with Latin America. In the New World, Household consolidated his personal ideal of the Latinized Englishman “accepting unhurriedly the local courtesies and conventions,” a role he would carry through his service first as fledgling saboteur and then as field security officer in World War II.

Household was sent to Bucharest and then to Greece, where one cannot help wondering if his path crossed that of the notable English *pícaro* Patrick Leigh Fermor, whose own life, from a teenage walking trip across Europe to Constantinople in the 1930s to his lighthearted caper of kidnapping a German general in Crete during the war, seems to leap straight from the pages of a Household novel. Later postings included Cairo and Jerusalem, where Household met his second wife, Ilona Gutmán, a

Hungarian national with whom he settled into a happy marriage, producing three children whose cultural and genetic blend must have been a source of particular satisfaction to their father.

Rogue Male is Household’s best-known work. Published in 1939 and made twice into a film (Fritz Lang’s *Man Hunt* in 1942 and a television movie, scripted by Frederic Raphael and starring Peter O’Toole, in 1976), it was his second adult novel after *The Third Hour* and the children’s adventure novel *The Spanish Cave* (first published as *The Terror of Villadonga* in 1936, the same year that his first story, “The Salvation of Pisco Gabar,” appeared in the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*). A less successful late sequel, *Rogue Justice* (1982), dots the i’s and crosses the t’s of its austere predecessor by giving the hero a name and a suitably bicultural identity (an Austrian countess for a mother).

The story opens as its narrator recounts in an offhand way how he decided on a sportsman’s whim to walk south across the border from Poland and stalk “the biggest game on earth,” an unnamed dictator who is clearly Hitler. Caught with the “great man” squarely in his telescopic sights, tortured outrageously and left for dead, he makes a daring escape back to England only to discover he’s still an outlaw, relentlessly pursued by the dictator’s minions and his own country’s police. After he determines he must go to ground like the hunted animal he is, a night spent on Wimbledon Common marks his first step down the evolutionary ladder to abjection and ultimate enlightenment. From there he makes his way to Dorset, then “from Dorset to the western corner of the county, and from that to four square miles” of countryside and his ultimate hiding place, the strip of ancient lane on a remote hillside.

It might seem incongruous that Household situated the stark encounter with Nature and human predators that ensues in a domesticated landscape to which the adjective “tame” is routinely appended. (Of the same Dorset countryside, the hero of *Bernardo Brown* notes: “Tame it was, but tame as some glossy, splendid

animal conscious of love and answering.”) Robert MacFarlane, who has traced the novel’s fictional destination to a specific hillside in Dorset’s Chideock Valley, notes that it is a New World notion that wilderness must be divorced from the human. In the literature of Britain, MacFarlane says, “wildernesses have always been profoundly human landscapes.”* The lane itself, sunk fifteen feet below the level of the surrounding fields, has been “worn down by the pack horses of a hundred generations.” Even with farmhouses lying close by, however, the old Roman road snaking the hills has been reclaimed by the local animals. In prose that hints of the mystic animism that would play an increasingly larger role in Household’s later novels, we are told that in the moonlight “it was teeming with life: sheep and cows lying on it, rabbits dancing in and out of ancient pits, owls gliding and hooting over the thorn.”

Our rogue male’s journey into deep countryside moves him back through human history as well—from the modern world of trains and automobiles through Roman times to the world of the Paleolithic hunter. In the visceral experience of hunting and being hunted Household finds deep roots in the relationship to the earth of Stone Age hunter-gatherers for whom killing is a religious practice, a holy exchange of energies around which both hunter and hunted observe the timeless rituals of impending death. Far from being anarchic, the world of predators and prey follows strict rules of conduct. In *Dance of the Dwarfs*, the unknown hunter’s “Declaration of Intent,” a high-pitched whistle, delivers fear and panic, then passivity, to the central nervous system of the hunted. In the late novel *The Sending*, the protagonist Alfyf Hollaston remarks of the fear instinct: “When we were only hunted and hunters—in Europe a mere three hundred generations ago—we shared [with animals] this sixth sense which told us when we were in danger.” And Charles von Dennim,

* *Granta*, “The Wild Places,” September 2007.

hero of *The Watcher in the Shadows*, says, “I believe that for the animals always, and for man sometimes, fear is only a vivid awareness of one’s unity with nature.”

As part of this process, the narrator of *Rogue Male* undergoes his own rite of passage from civilized man to animal “deprived of ordinary human cunning” and working from blind instinct. Gradually he takes on the attributes of a wild creature, moving so quietly he startles a fox and experiencing low-level thought transference with the feral cat he befriends. He’s able to achieve this attunement to the animal world partly thanks to a previous sojourn with an African tribe. (In *The Sending*, Alfyf communes with animals because of a similar experience with an Indian tribe and a genetic gift passed down in his own family.) For Household the descent into animal nature is an ascent that allows the human animal to experience a forgotten sense of identity with nature and all things living. Only “after much meditation” can civilized man experience the “mystic vision” that is the natural resting state of animals and primitive man. When he once achieved this communion, Alfyf says in *The Sending*, “I had ceased to exist as a man; I was a molecule of the unity of earth and light.”

But Household would also like us to believe that the ancient rites and practices of hunters still resonate through the quiet countryside of England. In the comic story “The Twilight of a God,” a Mithras altar is uncovered in the Roman cellar jointly shared by a pub and a village butcher shop that makes outstanding sausage. (The secret ingredient is bull’s blood, obtained through barely remembered rites performed on the sacrificial stone.) In *The Courtesy of Death*, a delicate parody of his own philosophy of the hunt, Household presents a Somerset group devoted to “metaphysical animism” that tries to revive, along with a sinister salutation called “the Apology,” the hunting rituals of their ancestors as depicted in cave paintings they discover in the deep caverns of the Mendips.

During the relentless heat of the chase, meanwhile, and as much to his own surprise as the reader's, the true motive of *Rogue Male*'s narrator slowly emerges. (Reader, stop here if you want to discover it for yourself.) Given the implausibility of assassination conducted as a "sporting stalk," he protests at first, to himself as well as his initial captors, his own apolitical nature: "I haven't any grievances myself. One can hardly count the upsetting of one's trivial private life and plans by European disturbances as a grievance." As he approaches the sunken lane in Dorset, however, he admits it's a place he found while in love, and the person he loved and shared it with has perished. As the pressures of the hunt mount and the screw tightens, he must engage his adversary "Quive-Smith" in a battle of wits as the dictator's operative conducts a Mephistophelian interrogation through the ventilator hole of his lair, using the narrator's professed libertarian beliefs to persuade him to sign a paper confessing that he intended to assassinate the dictator with the knowledge of the English government.

For the *Rogue Male* narrator, however, only the personal is legitimately political.* Like all Household heroes, he hates the state and respects the rights of the individual. He eschews all patriotism and believes only in "dying against," not "dying for." Only under extreme mental duress, then, does he finally admit, to Quive-Smith and to himself, that "of course" he had meant to shoot. And with that admission comes a flood of self-knowledge about the depth of the feelings he has never fully acknowledged: his love, grief, and rage over the execution of the woman he loved by the dictator's secret police. The man who had mocked, at the start of his adventure, the notion of "yowling of love like an Italian tenor" has been delivered into his higher, more authentic self by his deeper connection with the natural world as well as the conditions of his ordeal.

*In *Against the Wind*, Household notes significantly that his own sentiment toward Nazi Germany "had the savagery of a personal vendetta."

Quive-Smith, in contrast, whose courage, superior hunting skills, and intelligence superficially make him a Class Xer, is excluded from the brotherhood because of two overweening flaws—cruelty and ambition. Half English and half German, he resembles many other Household antagonists who serve as distorted mirror images of his heroes. The ex-Resistance fighter "Savarin" of *The Watcher in the Shadows* is a half-English, half-French vicomte who pursues Charles Dennim, the Austrian ex-aristocrat who served at Buchenwald as an English spy, for the same reason that the hero of *Rogue Male* hunted his prey—to avenge the death of a beloved woman at the hands of Hitler's minions. Ultimately, however, the French aristocrat forfeits his membership in Class X for the same shortcomings as Quive-Smith—sadism, extremism, and political fanaticism.

In Household's late masterpiece *Dance of the Dwarfs* (1968), the unknown adversary proves not to be human at all and delivers a particularly gruesome death to the hero and his Indian mistress. *Dance of the Dwarfs* further inverts this writer's usual pattern to focus on the vast and chillingly impersonal wilderness of the New World, pitting the hero, Owen Dawnay, against a foe who is only gradually revealed to be a creature of the impenetrable jungle bordering the llano, the vast inland plain of Colombia.* The shared theme of sacrificing one's life in the service of a doomed love makes *Rogue Male* and *Dance of the Dwarfs* Household's two finest novels.

After the *Rogue Male* narrator experiences his transcendent moment of clarity, the denouement unfolds swiftly. His prohibition against taking human life is lifted when Quive-Smith and his henchman kill the cat Asmodeus for sport and throw the body down the ventilator hole. Now that the rules of honor have

*In some respects, the predators in this novel resemble the worst sort of humans, including the Nazis in *Rogue Male*; they kill their own kind and kill for the pleasure of killing, acts that violate a kind of trans-species Class X code of honor.

been flagrantly breached, murder can be legitimized as an act of war. From the hide of his animal comrade he fashions a lethal slingshot as his instrument of vengeance, and once this score has been settled he will decide to take on his original quarry once more and do the job properly. Offsetting this announced return to almost certain death is the good-humored in-joke with readers that closes *Rogue Male* (further proof, if needed, that Household himself is a member in good standing of Class X): the narrator appends a letter to his chronicle instructing his solicitor to have it “brushed up by some competent hack and marketed in his name.”

MacFarlane rightly dubs Household the heir of Stevenson and Buchan, but the scale, I think, must be tipped in favor of the egalitarian Stevenson. Buchan’s Richard Hannay is a bluff South African colonial who is patriotic in a way Household would have found highly unattractive. Household’s Englishman “with no national prejudices” is a thoughtful man of action, ethical in a way hard to codify in an imperial rulebook, democratic in a way no Boer could stomach, and frankly sensual in a way no Buchan hero ever dreamed of. Household himself cites Defoe as a prime influence on his writings, and *Rogue Male* is indeed a kind of inland *Robinson Crusoe* complete with feline Friday. The limpid style and vivid intensity of the physical descriptions compare favorably with the Old English–cadenced prose of *Pincher Martin*, William Golding’s saga of a self-deceived Robinson Crusoe marooned on a North Atlantic island of his own invention. Household’s topographic passion for the English countryside, the loving poetic accuracy of his landscapes, replete with marvelous throwaway observations (on, for example, the “gaiety of the insect world”), holds more than a few echoes of Thomas Hardy. His confessed preference for the picaresque adds the “Latinised” flavor of the land of *Lazarillo de Tormes* to his very English narratives. Taking a far more radical position than his near contemporaries Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene in their tales of

“abroad,” finally, Household displays a rare identification with the non-English “Other” that anticipates the cosmopolitan post-colonial sensibility of the twenty-first century.

One suspects that Geoffrey Household, were he alive today, would be delighted by new DNA research suggesting that those of Her Majesty’s citizens whose ancestors were long-term inhabitants of the British Isles are far more genetically homogenous (forget Viking, Celt, Saxon, Norman!) than previously thought. He would be even more delighted by the likelihood that most of these people, himself included, descend from a single population of Paleolithic hunters who migrated north from the Iberian peninsula some 16,000 years ago—back in those far-off days “when men could simply walk from France, following game,” in the nostalgic words of a character in *The Courtesy of Death*—speaking a language, for the best and final touch, very much like that still current among his beloved Basques.* And it is not beyond the realm of possibility that some future spelunker in the Mendips, taking a cue from this twentieth-century romancer, will uncover a cave painting or two that brings to life again, across three hundred generations, the timeless dance of Hunter and Hunted in Household’s native land.

—VICTORIA NELSON

*Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British: A Genetic Detective Story*, quoted in Nicholas Wade, “English, Irish, Scots: They’re All One, Genes Suggest,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2007.