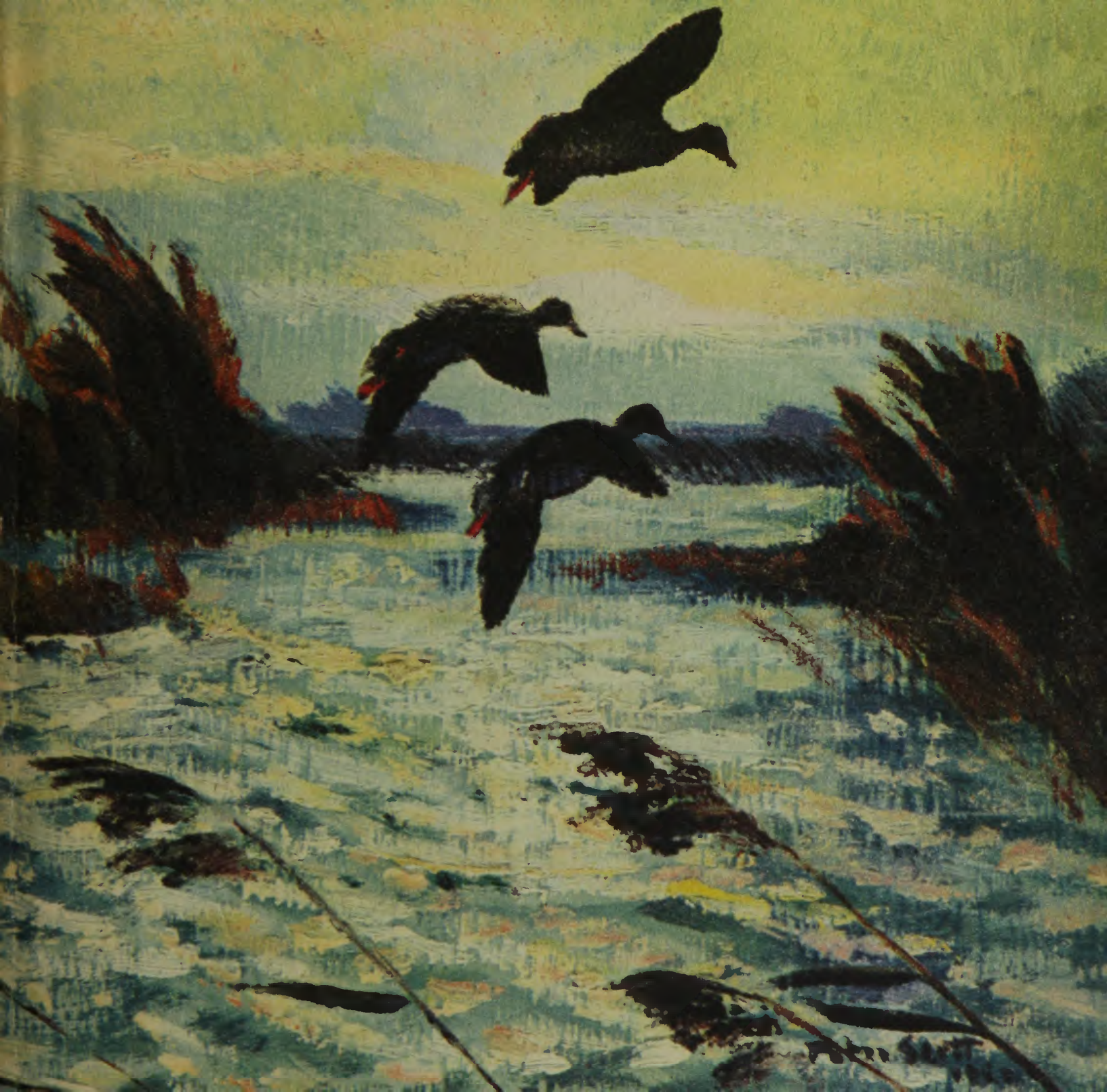


The EYE of the WIND
An autobiography

Peter Scott.





Illustrated on the front endpaper

Peregrine; Pintail; Mallard; Jackson's three
horned Chamaeleon; Housefly; Ne-ne or
Hawaiian Goose; Bushbuck; Eyed Hawk
Moth; Thecadactylus Gecko.

THE EYE OF THE WIND



THE EYE OF THE WIND



PETER SCOTT

Inscribed for my long-time
friend Wally with happy
memories of gliding, and
all good wishes...

Peter Scott.

London

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

TO
PHILIPPA

Eye of the wind, whose bearing in
A changeful sky the sage
Birds are never wrong about
And mariners must gauge—

The drift of flight, the fluttered jib
Are what we knew it by:
Seafarers cannot hold or sight
The wind's elusive eye.

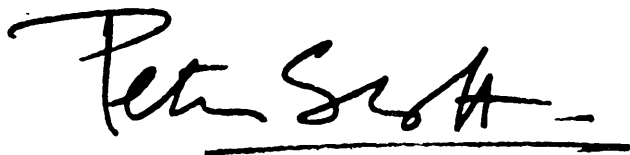
That eye, whose shifting moods inspire
The sail and trim the sheet,
Commands me, though I can but steer
Obliquely towards it.

C. Day Lewis.

FOREWORD

I AM without question the luckiest, and I believe the happiest man I know. As this is to be a story about me, I must make this plain at the outset: I am basically a happy person. I have gone through life supposing myself also to be quite simple. This may in itself be an over-simplification or perhaps I am just too lazy to enter into any lengthy introspection. My story tells what has happened to me rather than what I am or have been. It looks outwards rather than in, with an eye for events and adventure.

An autobiographer would be unnaturally lacking in vanity if he did not hope that his reader would entertain some sympathy for him by the time his story was told. Inevitably I hope that my story may lead to the ultimate conclusion that I am not a bad fellow really. Those parts of my life which might not lead to this conclusion are likely to be omitted, and though I suppose few autobiographical books set out to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, a certain ingenuousness (coupled with the danger of being found out) forces me to give this warning at the beginning. Stories which I have been telling for years with great conviction, believing them to be true to the smallest detail, have proved after careful research among my papers to be greatly garbled. Such stories can be corrected, but what of the host of other reminiscences of which no contemporary record remains? Must I water them all down in the sacred name of truth, or can the reader be trusted to apply the 'Scott reduction index'—an arbitrary figure of between twenty and fifty per cent by which all lengths, breadths, weights, distances and vehement statements should automatically be reduced? As an old Cambridge don once said to me: "My poor boy! Let this be a lesson to you only to believe half of what you hear."

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Peter Scott", with a horizontal line underneath the name.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY PUBLISHERS have allowed me this page on which to say ‘Thank you’ to all those who have made this book possible. As it is the story of my life this ought to include all those who have made my life possible—beginning with my parents. I hope however that my indebtedness over this wide field will emerge from the book itself. To acknowledge my gratitude to those who have actually helped to create the book, as a book, is a more manageable task. Especial thanks first to my wife Philippa for endless encouragement through the “I-can’t-think-who’s-going-to-want-to-read-this-stuff” stages of the writing; then to Elizabeth Jane Howard for bringing the monstrous original typescript to reasonable and publishable proportions (“You know, half a million words is really too long for *any* book”); to Douglas Eccleston for turning the spatch-cocked and much-pinned together manuscript into a comprehensible typescript; to Michael Garside for much assistance directly and indirectly connected with the book; and to my long-suffering publishers for their forbearance during the considerable period between the ‘absolutely final dead-line’ and the ultimate delivery of the typescript—a delay caused, at least in part, by the purchase of a new glider with the advance royalty on the book. I was particularly touched by their acceptance of the excuse that I was gathering material for the penultimate chapter.

Having sought in vain for a quotation which incorporated the book’s title, a possible alternative seemed to be a poem especially written for the purpose. For writing such a poem (and such a lovely one, too), my grateful thanks are due to Cecil Day Lewis.

I should also like to thank Messrs. *Country Life* for permission to quote from my earlier books, and to the following for permission to quote from letters and other documents or to reproduce photographs:

H.M. The Queen.

The First Lord of the Admiralty.

Karl Müller.

Dr. Gerald Gibbens.

Dr. Finnur Gudmundsson.

Dr. W. J. L. Sladen.

Mrs. Michael Warr.

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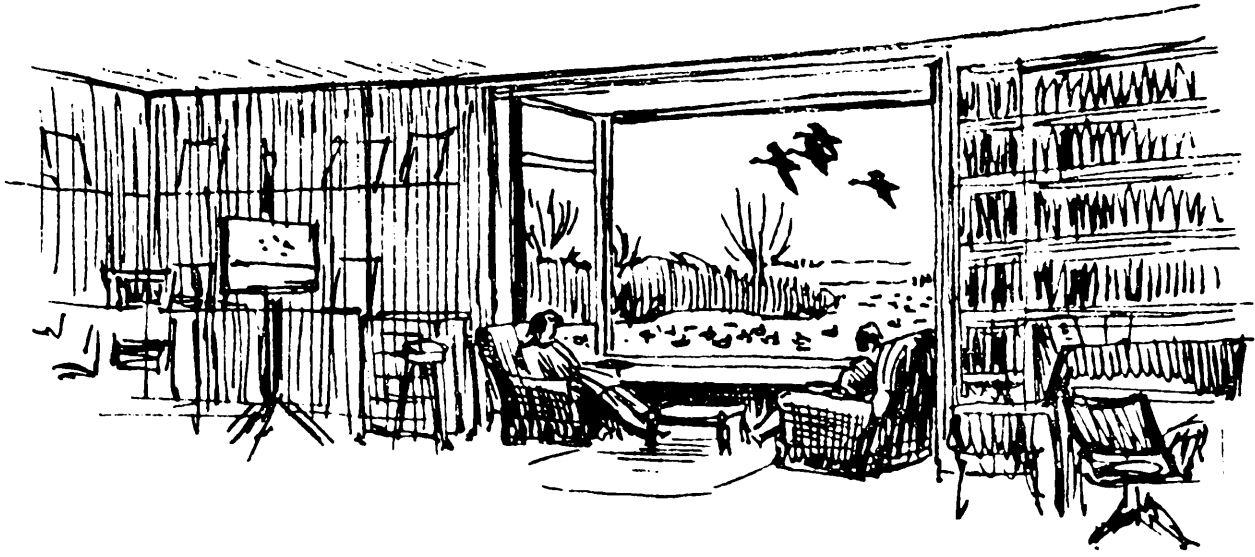
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Key to Acknowledgments

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|---|--|
| ¹ Madame Yevonde | ¹³ Dr. Gerald Gibbens. |
| ² C. Hulse | ¹⁴ Pen and ink drawing by Peter Scott |
| ³ John Bratby | ¹⁵ Associated Press |
| ⁴ C. Hills | ¹⁶ J. V. Beer |
| ⁵ Beken & Son | ¹⁷ <i>Country Life</i> |
| ⁶ Oil Paintings by Peter Scott | ¹⁸ Philippa Scott |
| ⁷ Central Art Library | ¹⁹ Bill Sladen |
| ⁸ <i>Eastern Daily Press</i> | ²⁰ Finnur Gudmundsson |
| ⁹ Water colour by Peter Scott | ²¹ <i>Homes & Gardens</i> |
| ¹⁰ Ismail Khodjeste | ²² Fayer |
| ¹¹ Eric Bruce | ²³ Shaw Wildman |
| ¹² <i>Life Magazine</i> | ²⁴ <i>Sunday Times</i> |

PART 1





CHAPTER I

The Window

ALL animals have interested me, and birds more than others, but wild geese have an almost mystical importance. Long ago I decided that my home must always be within sight and sound of the winter wild geese, which, in itself, drastically limits the choice of locality. There is only a small number of places in Britain where, from one spot, one can be sure of seeing and hearing wild geese daily through the winter months. On such a spot, close to the estuary of the River Severn, stands the house in which I live with my family. We built it on that precise spot for that precise reason, and in winter time the White-fronted Geese feed in the fields all around us. At dawn they stream over us on their morning flight and under the full moon the night echoes with their wild cry. It is just as I planned it long ago.

As I start to write this book on 29th March, 1957, I am sitting in the window of my studio. It is no ordinary window, for it is ten feet across and eight feet high, and it looks out upon water and birds and the green fields of Gloucestershire. From my armchair the window frames a picture of endless beauty, activity and diversity—a picture which gives me a peculiarly intense pleasure, because its composition is my own creation. A pool with islands reflects the flash of the setting sun in the ripples made by the ducks and geese that are swimming on it. There is a great crowd of birds, 300 or more, of many different kinds from all over the world. They have not long been fed and the nearest are dibbling at the water's edge less than six feet away from where I sit. Many of the birds are tame ones, brought from distant countries to live together here in the Vale of Berkeley—Ringed Teal from Brazil, Barrow's Goldeneyes from Iceland, Ruddy Ducks from North America, Ne-ne Geese from Hawaii, White-winged Wood Ducks

The light has gone, but still very dimly I can see the black birds moving about on the dark blue water and the black shapes of them as they fly against the dark blue sky; the whole background of the picture beyond the window is ultramarine in contrast to the red light of the room, which lies across it in reflection.

A pair of ducks circles round over the pond, out over the pollard willows until the two black specks are lost against the loom of the elm trees beyond and in the red reflection of the lamp shade behind me. I project their line of flight, following the course they will take if they come round again, and up they sweep out of the red glow and above the elms, round as they head the wind and . . . splash . . . down on to the pond. The elms line one of the fields where the wild geese feed in winter. The wild Whitefronts of the Severn Estuary have gone east on the first stage of the long migration which will take them to their breeding grounds in Arctic Russia; they left a fortnight ago, and only a week or two before that I was out under those elms in the rain-soaked dusk. We were setting a net to catch the geese in order to mark them with rings on their legs; and before daylight on the following morning we were back again putting the finishing touches to our work before the geese should come. For me it was a memorable morning; its dawn was cold and grey and cheerless with a southeasterly wind which promised rain.

A single goose called out of the darkness and then passed low over the field, only just visible against the sky. He was the mysterious and still unexplained scout, the forerunner of the great skeins, who flies yelping over the feeding-ground in the early gloom a few minutes before the main flocks arrive. Then above the song of the wind in the old elms we heard the first clamour of the main flight. We ran to the hedge, and stood there half hidden by it, as wave after wave of geese passed low over our heads. It was too dark for them to see us through the thin hawthorn branches and to us the birds were no more than black silhouettes against the low grey clouds.

To each of the five of us watching they meant something different. To one they were a wholly new experience, to another his habitual quarry as a wildfowler (here flying much lower than usual); to the third a newly acquired object of scientific study, and to the fourth familiar birds whose behaviour had occupied his time as a professional biologist for the last eight years. To me they were something different again. They were the single continuing passionate interest of my life, as a painter, and as a naturalist—



6. 1931

Punt-gunning in an oilskin skirt on Wigtown bay and a three-jump on the Kulm rink at St. Moritz.



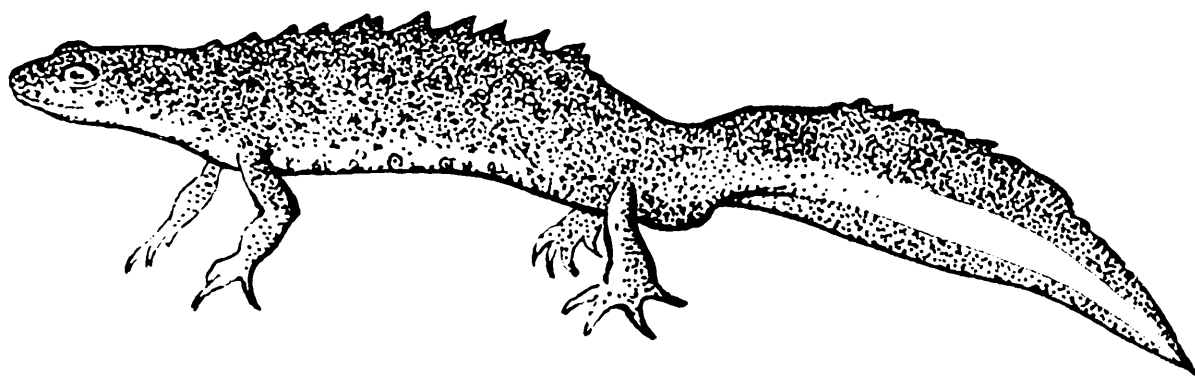
6. 1931

Why, when I flushed the geese from their first field, did two small lots go off into the distance instead of yielding to the powerful mechanisms which hold the flock together? Small mysteries these, leading up to the much larger mysteries of migration and navigation and the evolution of the traditions which order the life of a wild goose. To a naturalist these were signposts on a road whose end was far over the horizon; and I had been a naturalist ever since I could remember, for I had become a naturalist by the design of my parents.

A few days before he died in his tent in the Antarctic on 29th March, 1912, forty-five years ago to the day when I began this book, my father wrote to my mother:

“Make the boy interested in Natural History. It is better than games. They encourage it at some schools . . .”

I was two-and-a-half-years old then and I cannot remember a time when I have not been interested in Natural History. But my first memory is of fire and panic at a Christmas party.





► NAVAL OFFICER

His war service began by volunteering for the Navy, 1939. He served in destroyers in the Battle of the Atlantic, and Light Coastal Forces in the Channel, 1942-45. Veteran of the Dieppe Raid, designer of the camouflage scheme adopted by the Admiralty for all ships in the Atlantic and many elsewhere. M.B.E., D.S.C. and bar and three times Mentioned in Despatches.

► YACHT RACING CHAMPION

Three times winner of the Prince of Wales' Cup, bronze medallist Olympic Games 1936, where he represented Great Britain in single-handed sailing. Owner (jointly with John Winter) of the International 14 ft. Dinghy *Thunder and Lightning*. President of the International Yacht Racing Union.

► GLIDER PILOT

The newest of his recreations and enthusiasms, discovered at Nympsfield (Bristol Gliding Club), "the port from which I can explore the ocean of the sky". Holder of the Gold 'C' International Badge, 1958. Diamond Badge for Goal Flight, 1959; for Height (18,300 ft.) 1960.

► AUTHOR

of a dozen books from *Morning Flight* and *Wild Chorus* onwards, and illustrator of as many, among them Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose*.

► BROADCASTER AND TV PERSONALITY

His commentaries have included the Victory Procession, the Royal Wedding. He has broadcast monthly since 1947 in Children's Hour Nature Parliament; his television programme, *Look*, has been running since 1953.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Full of personalities and personality, of action and adventure—vivid, varied and exciting in its material and in its writing.

An autobiography for all who share any of Peter Scott's innumerable interests and recreations, or want to know more of the man himself.

An autobiography good to give and to possess, because, above all, it has zest and contentment. This is a happy book by a man who says "I am without question the luckiest and, I believe, the happiest man I know."

The publishers are
HODDER AND STOUGHTON



*"I am without
question the
luckiest and, I
believe, the happiest
man I know"*

Part of the fascination of this autobiography lies in following the development of Peter Scott's interests, aims, individuality; much in his past life has led him to his present home at Slimbridge, Gloucestershire.

Here is the story of his childhood in London, at Sandwich, and abroad, and pictures of the famous people he saw with the eyes of a child: Barrie, his beloved godfather; Lord Knutsford, his guardian; Axel Munthe, met on a holiday, whose complete course he changed; Edward Hilton Young, who became his stepfather . . . Then his schooldays: Oundle and the real beginning of his bent for natural history; his first taste of bird-watching, his pet ferret, the bats he kept; his preference always for living creatures rather than specimens and dissection; his illustration of *Adventures with Birds* by Three Schoolboys.

Trinity College, Cambridge, where he roof-climbed with Gino Watkins, Jack Longland, 'Bunny' Fuchs; where wildfowling, painting, sailing became absorbing pursuits not on the University curriculum. Though he no longer goes armed to kill the things he loves—whether duck or deer—how he recaptures these punt-gunning expeditions by day and night! Out of his undergraduate painting—and the sale of some of these bird-pictures—came the decision to study at Munich State Academy and the Royal Academy Schools, London. Out of his collection of tame wildfowl at the East Lighthouse, Sutton Bridge, Lincolnshire, came the first of his travels in search of birds and the certainty of what he wished to do above all. When his war service was over, a December evening of 1945 found him squelching up a muddy lane towards a cottage and century-old disused duck decoy, his mind full of future plans.

The whole life-story is here, from his earliest memories to the creation and development of the Wildfowl Trust. At The New Grounds, with Philippa, his wife, and his children, two daughters and a son, he knows real and rare contentment. "It is just as I promised myself it would be, when I first decided my home must be within sight and sound of wild geese."

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