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A Countryman Remembers by H. E. Bates

In a Cowslip's Bell I Lie



Not long ago a lady wrote to me to say that neither she nor her husband had ever seen a cowslip. This melancholy confession at once set me off on two journeys, or rather, three: two of them in memory, the other in reality.

The first took me back to my childhood, to early summer days when I went with my grandmother into the meadows at cowslip time, there to see them dancing in golden crowds and to pick them by the basketful, ready for making wine. Not only can I still see them, with wonderful clarity, growing in the fields: I can also see them being laid out to dry, looking exactly like the miniature fingers of green and yellow kid gloves.

The second journey took me over the border from my native Northamptonshire into Bedfordshire and thence into Huntingdonshire. In Bedfordshire I came one day on a wood, not of cowslips but of the much rarer oxlip. There were a great many of them growing among sheets of primroses and I sat down to drink them in. Presently, as I sat there, I discovered I wasn't alone. Six or seven fox cubs suddenly appeared and started to gambol gaily among the flowers like rolling fluffy balls of fur, quite oblivious of me.

That wonderfully beautiful picture of the little foxes playing their games among the primroses and oxlips will, I think, never fade. Nor will another: that of the splendour of cowslips growing in the damp ditches of Huntingdonshire roadsides. They certainly were the richest, largest cowslips I have ever seen and when I wrote back to my lady correspondent it was to tell her to make a pilgrimage into Huntingdonshire.

It was just as well I did, because not long later I read a piece of news even more melancholy than the lady's original confession. The cowslips of Huntingdonshire, it appeared, were a dying race: even in those rich pastures the flower was in danger of dying out—so much so that one Huntingdonshire preservation society had actually bought a cowslip field in order to save it from almost certain extinction.

As a rider to her confession about cowslips my correspondent had added sadly that in her part of the world, somewhere in the West Midlands, the roadsides were utterly barren of flowers, a piece of news that sent me off on my third journey, there to count my numerous Kentish blessings.

That journey took me, and still takes me, along a narrow little road about ten miles long. There is really nothing at all spectacular about this road, which I always call a back road because it wanders away from all villages and doesn't seem to be going anywhere. The fields on either side of it are flattish, the hedgerows neat and trimmed.



There are no real woods, only a narrow copse or two which, at one place, meet overhead to make a dark summer tunnel. A rather dingy little stream crosses the road a couple of times, flooding it after very heavy rains and draining out to yellow mud after prolonged dry spells.

That is all: but from early spring to well into autumn this homely piece of road is a veritable paradise of flowers. It begins, sometimes as early as February, with the first primroses. As these increase, yellowing the damp banks under the hedgerows they are joined by a ceaseless procession of wild loveliness: Celandines, buttercups, violets, bluebells,

anemones and perhaps the loveliest of them all, meadow lady-smock. As March slides into April and April into May, the picture changes and enriches, until summer chokes everything with an even greater glory. From the meadowsweet and cowparsley, creamy in the dykes, to the hawthorn and dog roses that crown the hedges there seems always to be something of everything—except, oddly enough, cowslips.

I never cease to relish and marvel at this flower stream. Nor do I allow myself to forget the sobering thought that only a few years ago, we very nearly lost it all. At that time Authority, witless and insensitive as it so often is, suddenly announced that it was about to spray the roadsides with weed-killer, no doubt on the pretext that it would save labour. At once there was a concerted outcry from country lovers that would have been hard to ignore if the Government had suddenly announced that it was about to demolish St. Paul's. 'Hands off our roadsides' the cry went ringing across the land like a clarion call. Authority, its tail between its miserable legs, crept away in silent humiliation.

If the cowslip is indeed in danger of extinction in England no such fate has yet overtaken it across the Channel. Even the airfield at Le Touquet is full of them and as I made yet another journey, this time across France, a few years ago, the meadows bordering the central rivers were all full of them. Happily the roadsides had, like my beloved little back road, retained their glory too, so that I saw that exquisite thing *Artemisia pulsatilla*, the Pasque flower, blooming unmolested, and wild Solomon's Seal, green hellebores and wild aquilegia.

Going further south still there were little dwarf flowers in mauve and purple, which reminds me that my little back road also supports two irises—our waterside yellow flag and its companion dyke inhabitant, *I. foetidissima*. The latter cannot compete with the cowslip's bell for grace and sweetness of course, but its berries glow like torches in autumn's darkening days.

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