# Man and the Natural World[1]

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Modern sociologists have been puzzled by the innate anti-urbanism and love of 'nature' of the English. For instance, Mann notes that 'the attraction of the rural residence and urban work is very apparent'. The only explanation he can give is to follow Anthony Sampson, and argue in a circular way, that it is 'part of the Englishman's basic desire to become a landed aristocrat'.'[2] This is one aspect of a wider set of paradoxes which presented the enquiring foreigner in the nineteenth century with something of a shock. England was the most urbanized country in the world, yet one where the yearning for the countryside and rural values was the most developed. Its strangely anti-urban bias was shown in the prevalence of parks, the ubiquity of flower gardens, the country holiday industry, the dreams of retirement to a honeysuckle cottage and the emphasis on 'nature' and rural values in the Romantic and pre-Raphaelite movements. One of the most acute analysts of these curiosities was the Frenchman, Hyppolyte Taine, in his *Notes on England*, based on impressions of England during the 1860s.

Taine noticed the rurality within urbanity of the English when he visited the city parks where 'both taste and scale are utterly different from ours'. For instance, 'Saint James's Park is a real piece of country, and of English country: enormous ancient trees, real meadows, a lake peopled by ducks and wading birds, cows, and folded sheep graze the eternally fresh grass ... What a contrast with the Tuileries, the Champs-Elysees, the Luxembourg!'[3] He noticed it when he visited the gardens and parks round country houses.

> We have visited seven or eight gentlemen's parks ... The perfect meadows shine under the sun and are richly covered with buttercups and daisies ... What freshness, and what silence! You feel relaxed, rested: this natural beauty receives you with smooth caresses, discreetly, intimately ... In my opinion these gardens reveal, better than any other work, the poetic dream in the English soul ... All their imagination, all their native inventiveness has gone into their parks.[4]

He noticed it in the layout of the industrial towns. Walking round the richer part of Manchester he, wrote that

> Here and in Liverpool, as in London, the English character can be seen in their way of building. The townsman does everything in his power to cease being a townsman, and tries to fit a country-house and a bit of country into a comer of the town. He feels the need to be in his own home, to be alone, king of his family and servants, and to have about him a bit of park or garden in which he can relax after his artificial business life.[5]

Taine saw the same love of country over town, so contrasted to his own culture, reflected in the layout of the land. For the English, the

> city is not, as it is with us, the favourite place of residence. Apart from the great manufacturing towns, provincial cities, York for instance, are inhabited almost solely by shopkeepers: the *élite*, the nation's leaders, are elsewhere, in the country. London itself is now no more than a great business centre: people meet there, for three or four months

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[2] Mann, *Urban Sociology*, 94.
[3] Taine, *Notes*, 16.
[4] Taine, Notes, 147-8
[5] Taine, *Notes*, 220.

> during the summer, to talk, amuse themselves, see their friends, look to their interests, renew their acquaintances. But their roots are in their 'country seats': there lies their real motherland.[6]

As a literary critic and one of the foremost experts on English literature of the century, he noticed the curious obsession with the countryside, nature, the rural, in English literature. 'These people adore the country: you have only to read their literature, from Chaucer to Shakespeare, from Thompson to Wordsworth and Shelley, to have proof of this'.[7]

England was the most industrialized country in the world, the one where animal power was least essential, having been replaced by steam, and where animals were consequently no longer central to production. Yet it was paradoxically the country where the concern for animals was most developed in the world, expressed in creative literature, in painting, in concern for animal welfare and in the widespread prevalence of pets. England was still almost the most carnivorous of all societies, yet it was the most concerned with arguments for vegetarianism. It was a country in which man and animal had become separated, nature had been subdued and distanced. Yet it was in England that Darwin and Wallace finally successfully linked man and animal through the theory of the evolution of species. The heart of the paradox is that England was the most developed capitalistic and industrial society, when man lived in a largely artificial, man-made landscape, yet it was in England that the respect for, and love of, the wild and the non-artificial was most evident. How are we to explain these contradictions, many of which have become absorbed into the form of capitalism that has been exported to America, Australia, Canada and other parts of the former Empire?

One of the most impressive attempts to summarize the evidence and to explain the puzzles provides us with a very good start down the road to an explanation. This is the book by Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (1983). Thomas's central argument is that these are not real oppositions or contradictions at all, but are linked as cause and effect. It was because of the urbanism, the industrialism and the general distancing and control of nature that many of the peculiarities of the English that so struck foreigners could develop.

Keith Thomas's argument is as follows. If we compare the start and end of the period he reviews, 1500 and 1800, a series of complete changes in perception and feeling had occurred. By the end we are in such a changed world that it is not inappropriate to speak of a series of revolutions, to be placed alongside the industrial, agricultural and political revolutions charted by historians. In essence, we have moved from a pre-modern, pre -capitalistic, magical cosmology, into a modern, capitalistic, scientific one. Weber's 'disenchantment of the world' has occurred, Marx's alienation of man from the natural world is complete. In 1500 we are in an anthropocentric world of the Bible. All creatures are ordained for man's use; 'nature' is made for man alone and has no rights apart from man. 'Man stood to animal as did heaven to earth, soul to body, culture to nature'. This assumption of a man-ordained world was gradually eroded during this period. For example, species no longer came to be classified by their utility to humans, but rather by their inherent characteristics. This' revolution in perception - for it was no less' at the upper intellectual and social levels, had a 'traumatic effect upon the outlook of ordinary people'. Basically what happened was the separation of man from nature. 'Crucial' to the older beliefs was the interblending of man and nature, 'the ancient assumption that man and nature were locked into one interacting world'. There then occurred the split between man and nature, between thought and emotion, which is part of the dissociation of sensibility. The natural world was no longer full of human significance. No longer was every natural event studied for its meaning for humans, 'for the

[6] Taine, Notes, 141.
[7] Taine, *Notes*, 16.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had seen a fundamental departure from the assumptions of the past'.[8] That loss of innocence and of meaning in nature, reflected in Wordsworth's poetry, had occurred at a national level.

As the link between man and nature was broken, paradoxically people became more emotionally involved with particular animals and more concerned with the rights of animals in general. Thus' a combination of religious piety and bourgeois sensibility ... led to a new and effective campaign' in suppression of cruel sports. This was part of the general 'dethronement of man'. Thus 'the explicit acceptance of the view that the world does not exist for man alone can fairly be regarded as one of the great revolutions in modern Western thought'. This major revolution was the result of many factors. There were scientific and intellectual discoveries: the telescope expanded the heavens and diminished man in space, geological discoveries diminished man in time, the microscope brought out the complexity of nature, exploration and empire brought unimagined species to light. There were economic and social causes. 'The triumph of the new attitude was closely linked to the growth of towns and the emergence fan industrial order in which animals became increasingly marginal to the process of production. This industrial order first emerged in England; as a result, it was there that concern for animals was most widely expressed'. Kindness to animals, for example, depended on the newly created wealth; it was 'a luxury which not everyone had learnt to afford'.[9]

Just as these pressures led to a revolution in the perception and treatment of animals, so they did in relation to trees and flowers. Once the forests had been wild and magical. As the trees were eliminated and became less important economically, people became fonder of them, emotionally involved in a new way. Similarly with flowers: as the wild world shrunk, so the domesticated version expanded. Here was another revolution. The expansion of flower gardening in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was so great 'as to justify our adding to all the other revolutions of the early modern period another one: the Gardening Revolution'. There emerged 'that non-utilitarian attitude to the natural world', that delight in nature for its own sake, as an end and not as a means, which is the theme of the book.[10]

At the start of the period, the English had looked to the city. 'In Renaissance times', we are told, 'the city had been synonymous with civility, the country with rusticity and boorishness'.[11] By the end of the period this was all reversed. At the start of the period and right up to the end of the seventeenth century there was a dislike of wildness; as late as the second half of the seventeenth century many travellers through mountain districts had been disgusted or terrified by the countryside. But in the second half of the eighteenth century the passion for mountains was under way. Security and control were prerequisites for this new appreciation. As agriculture became more rational, orderly and intensive, so people yearned for the opposite. New security, man's increasing control over the natural world 'was the essential precondition for greater tolerance'. Only when species defined as 'vermin' had been almost totally eliminated did they start to be protected. The irony was that the 'educated tastes of the aesthetes had themselves been paid for by the developments which they affected to deplore'.[12]

Thus it was that rapid urbanization, the replacement of animal by artificial power, growing affluence and security, a widening intellectual horizon, had led to a new dilemma. Previously the

[8] Thomas, *Natural World*, 35, 70, 75, 90.
[9] Thomas, *Natural World*, 159, 167, 181, 186.
[10] Thomas, *Natural World*, 224, 240.
[11] Thomas, *Natural World*, 243.
[12] Thomas, *Natural World*, 243, 273, 287.

problem had been to conquer, to domesticate, the natural world. Yet as that problem was solved, a new difficulty had emerged, namely 'how to reconcile the physical requirements of civilization with the new feelings and values which that same civilization had generated'. Thus, we are told, 'by 1800 the confident anthropocentrism of Tudor England had given way to an altogether more confused state of mind'.[13]

The argument is elegant and largely convincing, the illustrative and supporting evidence apt and enlightening. Most authors would have stopped at this point. Many would have succumbed to the temptation to present us with a neat and watertight argument, which largely conforms to our expectations yet expands our understanding by explaining the resolution of the paradoxes at the heart of modern developments. Yet such is Thomas's rigour and scholarship that he has noted his doubts and difficulties. This enables us to see below the surface a sub-plot which is partly in contradiction to the main argument. For when we examine the material in more depth, the story is not so clear. Let us examine these hints and ambivalences.

Concerning the 'disenchantment of the world', it is not clear that this occurred after the Reformation, for Thomas tells us that 'since Anglo-Saxon times the Christian Church in England had stood out against the worship of wells and rivers. The pagan divinities of grove, stream and mountain had been expelled, leaving behind them a disenchanted world to be shaped, moulded and dominated'.[14] Although Thomas is right to point out that it is too simple to see this disenchantment as simply equated with Christianity, there is certainly an ascetic stress in Christianity, and particularly in the northern variety, which was hostile interfusion of man and nature, to ‘magic' and 'symbolic thinking'. Closely related was the supposed shift from the anthropocentric classification of the world, a growing tendency to recognize the separateness and autonomy of the natural. World. Having argued that this change was a central feature of the revolution in perception, Thomas continues that 'there was, of course, nothing new about the realization that the natural world had a life of its own. 'The view was fully propounded in Aristotle. Furthermore, although attempts were made to classify things in a non-anthropocentric way, Thomas shows that Linnaeus himself classified dogs by their human uses, and even today lawyers impose human criteria on animals. Likewise, though there was a growing interest in the natural world for its own sake, in the exact observations which would lead to new discoveries in botany and zoology, we are reminded that 'there were plenty of people in medieval England who observed the natural world very carefully'.[15]

In the section on 'vulgar errors', we find further curious features. It begins to appear that instead of an ancient 'folk tradition', an alternative way of thinking and feeling welling up from an oral culture, a cosmology appropriate to a pre-modern, peasant, society, what we really have is a jumble of out-of-fashion pieces of the 'scientific' high culture. The beliefs were in fact 'learned errors, rather than vulgar ones', many based on Pliny, Aristotle and others. 'Sir Thomas Browne in the seventeenth century and William Cobbett in the early nineteenth, both of them acute observers, held the classical writers responsible for the bulk of English rural superstitions'. Nor was the attack on 'vulgar errors' a new one, a new battle of worldviews in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but rather the perennial attack on out-of-date ideas. 'Vehement Protestants' might attack the popular superstitions, but, as Thomas states, they were doing so 'like some of their medieval predecessors'.[16] To give one example of the ebb and flow of opinion, the belief that the barnacle goose was hatched from shells on trees was rejected in 1633. This was not a new argument. The

[13] Thomas, *Natural World*, 301.
[14] Thomas, *Natural World*, 22.
[15] Thomas, *Natural World*, 51
[16] Thomas, *Natural*, 77, 78.

belief had been. Attacked by the Emperor Frederick II in the twelfth century and by the philosopher Albert the Great in the thirteenth. John Gerard had resurrected the belief in his Herball in 1597.

In sum, then, the separation of man and the natural world was not a new phenomenon, invented as mankind for the first time gained complete mastery over nature. For though we are told that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we see 'a fundamental departure from the assumptions of the past', in that nature was being studied in its own right, we are also told that 'this was a return to that separation of human society from nature which had been pioneered by the ancient Greek atomists Leucippus and Democritus'. Nor did the temporary return to a separatist philosophy last for long, for' even as the older view was driven out by the scientists, it began to creep back in the form of the pathetic fallacy of the Romantic poets and travellers'. The very rocks and trees became filled with life and feeling. The same impression that rather than dealing with a change from 'traditional' to 'modern', we are dealing with constant ebb and flow, emerges from further consideration of the break with the anthropocentric view. Having stated that this was 'one of the great revolutions in modern Western thought', the next sentence continues: 'Of course, there had been many ancient thinkers, Cynics, sceptics and Epicureans, who denied that men were the centre of the Universe or that mankind was an object of special concern to the gods. In the Christian era a periodic challenge to anthropocentric complacency had been presented by sceptical thinkers'. Nor was it all conquering: 'as the nineteenth century debate on evolution would show, anthropocentrism was still the prevailing outlook'.[17]

We may now consider more specific side effects of these shifts. The English are widely known as a nation of pet-keepers, as well as shopkeepers. This tradition seems to go back a long way. Thomas points out that 'pet-keeping had been fashionable among the well-to-do in the Middle Ages'."[18] We learn of lapdogs, birds, rabbits, hounds, caged birds, squirrels and monkeys, for instance.[19] About the rest of the population we have little evidence, but as soon as they become visible in the records, pets are widespread. Thus Thomas concludes that 'it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that pets seemed to have really established themselves as a normal feature of the middle-class household'.[20] Thomas gives evidence of monkeys, tortoises, otters, rabbits, squirrels, lambs and caged birds. To these may be added many others. Thomas Ady in 1656 listed rats, mice, dormice, rabbits, birds, grasshoppers, caterpillars and snakes, as both 'lawful and common among very innocent and harmless people' as pets. He even told of a Gentleman who 'did once keep in a Box a Maggot that came out of a Nut, till it grew to an incredible bigness'.[21] The range was very wide, therefore, and it may be mistaken, as Thomas argues, to believe that taste in pets grew more catholic in the eighteenth century.[22] It is more difficult to obtain some idea of the incidence of pets, but two indications of the extent of the keeping of domestic animals can be given. In his pictorial encyclopaedia for children, Comenius gave a picture of a house and its animals; these included the dog, cat, and squirrel, ape and monkey which 'are kept at home for delight'.[23] Defoe, in his late-seventeenth- century reconstructed *Journal of the Plague Year* describes how almost every house in London had a dog and several cats,[24] though here, as elsewhere, we face difficult problems of defining what exactly a 'pet' is. If it is regarded as non-utilitarian, like a flower garden, we nevertheless find that by the sixteenth century in the large

[17] Thomas, *Natural World*, 90, 91, 166, 169.
[18] Thomas, *Natural World*, 110.
[19] Salzman, *English Life*, 100-2.
[20] Thomas, *Natural World*, 110.
[21] Ady, *Candle*, 135.
[22] Thomas, *Natural World*, 110.
[23] Comenius, *Orbis*, 55.
[24] Defoe, *Journal*, 137.

middling ranks of society many had rabbits, weasels, ferrets, monkeys, parrots, squirrels, muskrats, toy dogs, and other pets.[25] If it is certainly the case that by '1700 all the symptoms of obsessive pet keeping were in evidence',[26] it could well be argued that strong indications of such an obsession were present several centuries earlier, as soon as we have sufficient documentation to be able to note pets. It is clear from this that the phenomenon developed well before urbanization and industrialization could have had much effect. Widespread pet keeping is a by-product of something deeper than the changes of the eighteenth century.

A sentimental involvement with animals shown in pet keeping is closely associated with the topic of cruelty to animals. The picture here is also not a straightforward one. At first we are told that the English were once notorious for their cruelty to animals, eating bloody meat to an unusual degree, engaging in animal fighting and bloody sports. Later, England became the home of the League Against Cruel Sports and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The transformation appears to be sudden and revolutionary. Thus a section of Thomas's book is headed 'New Arguments'. Yet we are immediately told that 'there was, of course, nothing new about the idea that unnecessary cruelty to animals was a bad thing'. Thomas very properly avoids the Whiggish view that men gradually became intrinsically more humane: 'what had changed was not the sentiment of humanity as such, but the definition of the area within which it was allowed to operate'. But even this watered down view is challenged, for classical and medieval authors are cited who had used a classification which allowed humanity and kindness to be shown to animals. A striking example is the poem 'Dives et Pauper', written in England not later than 1410. This is at length and Thomas concludes that ‘this is a notable passage and a very embarrassing one to anybody trying to trace some development in English thinking about cruelty’.[27]

Thomas then makes the remarkable statement that the ‘truth is that one single, coherent and remarkably constant attitude underlay the great bulk of the preaching and pamphleteering against animal cruelty between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries’. He proceeds to summarize this attitude and to conclude that ‘so far as their main arguments were concerned there was a notable lack of historical development’, the ‘position was constant’. So much for ‘New Arguments’; what of the next section headed ‘New Sensibilities’? Again we are soon told that ‘of course, spontaneous tender-heartedness, as such, was not new’. A considerable amount of literature is cited to show the ‘new sensibility’ at work before 1700. What happened in the eighteenth century was not a radical novelty, but a spreading of the feelings; they ‘seem to have been much more widely dispersed’ and were ‘much more explicitly backed up by the religious and philosophical teachings of the time’.[28]

If we turn from animals to plants, we may consider first the ‘Gardening Revolution’. It is indeed true that the English are unusually enthusiastic domestic gardeners. It is also true that the content of their gardens altered dramatically over the centuries. We are told that ‘in 1500 there were perhaps 200 kinds of cultivated plant in England. Yet in 1839 the figure was put at 18,000’. But because there were few cultivated species to choose from before 1500, this does not mean that flower gardening was uncommon. There were commercial plant sellers from at least the thirteenth century and we are assured that ‘more flower-gardening had gone on in the Middle Ages than is sometimes appreciated’, even though the ‘repertoire seems to have been fairly limited’.[29]

[25] Pearson, *Elizabethans*, 19.
[26] Thomas, *Natural World*, 117.
[27] Thomas, *Natural World*, 150, 150, 152.
[28] Thomas, *Natural World*, 153, 154, 173, 174.
[29] Thomas, *Natural World*, 226.

This repertoire was limited by what was native to England and Europe, but it is symptomatic of the innate enthusiasm that as soon as it became possible to vary the plants by importing exotic species from newly discovered America and the widening contacts with Africa and Asia, people enthusiastically did so. William Harrison in the later sixteenth century marvelled at the English garden which had been ‘wonderfully’ increased in its beauty not only with flowers but also with ‘herbs, plants, and annual fruits’ which ‘are daily brought unto us from the Indies, Americas, Taprobane (Ceylon), Canary Isles, and all parts of the world'. As a result 'there is not almost one nobleman, gentleman, or merchant that hath not great store of these flowers'. Harrison, an Essex vicar, concluded by boasting a little of his own garden ‘Which is but small and the whole area thereof little above three hundred foot of ground, and yet, such hath been my good luck in purchase of the variety of simples, that, notwithstanding my small ability, there are very near three hundred of one sort and other contained therein, no one of them being common or usually to be had'.[30]

The enthusiasm for gardening, from the small cottage garden to the large garden of the gentry house, which is such a striking and characteristic feature of England even up to the present, was clearly indicated from the earliest detailed records of the sixteenth century. We are told that 'Elizabethans did not spend any more time indoors than necessary, for they were lovers of gardens if they loved their homes', and Pearson provides extensive accounts of the gentry and merchant gardens of the time.[31] Contemporary treatises on gardening began to be published as soon as printing became common for instance, Thomas Hill's *A Most Briefe and Pleasaunt Treatyse, Teachynge Howe to Dress, Save and Set a Garden* in 1563. The poetry of the Elizabethans, and in particular Spenser and Shakespeare, as well as the central motif of the Garden of Eden as the fount of innocence and pleasure, all indicate the very widespread absorption with natural beauty in the shape of flowers and trees. As the philosopher Bacon argued in his essay 'Of Gardens' in the early seventeenth century, 'God Almighty first planted a garden. And indeed it is the purest of human pleasures. It is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man, without which, buildings and palaces are but gross handiworks'.[32]

Such appreciation was not limited to the very wealthy. There is evidence that ordinary, middling, folk were keen gardeners. Writing of the English yeoman in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Mildred Campbell concluded that 'already gardens, that happy result of the Englishman's climate and his skill, added beauty and colour for a part of the year to the farm and village scene'.[33] She alludes to the record made by a neighbour of all the flowers that were in bloom in the garden of a certain 'Goodwife Cantrey', a Northamptonshire yeoman's wife, on 28 July 1658. These included 'double and single larkspurs, double and single Sweet Williams, three kinds of spiderwort, lupin in four colours, purple and white scabious, marigolds, Life Everlasting, London pride, Hollyhocks and many other flowers', as well as medicinal flowers like fennel, camomile and white lilies.[34]

It is, of course, difficult to know how widespread gardening and the love of flowers was, but Thomas gives several pieces of evidence to suggest that it was indeed spread down to very ordinary people in the seventeenth century. He quotes John Worlidge who in 1677 wrote that 'in most parts of the southern parts of England', there was scarce a cottage' which was without 'its proportionable garden, so great a delight do most of men take in it'. A few years earlier, a book on flower gardening intended chiefly for 'plain and ordinary countrymen and. women' had been published and

[30] Harrison, *Description*, 265, 270-1.
[31] Pearson, *Elizabethans*, 58ff.
[32] Bacon, *Essays*, xlvi
[33] Campbell, *English Yeoman*, 241.
[34] Fussell, *English Countrywoman*, 65.

the first impression was sold out in three months.[35] We can be sure that the widespread and enthusiastic interest in flowers and gardens is present well before the growth of cities and industrialism in the second half of the eighteenth century. Again, we must try to explain it by something that is present in England before the seventeenth century.

From flowers, we may turn to wilds, and particularly mountains. At first sight we are faced by a revolutionary perceptual change in the period between 1660 and 1760, when mountains and wilds became attractive instead of intolerable. But a closer examination shows that many of those who wrote in the period up to the end of the seventeenth century did not feel enthusiastic about the wilder scenery less because of instinctive aversion than because of the uselessness of such areas. Thus Daniel Defoe was oppressed by the mountains of northwest England because, unlike the Peak district, the Alps, the hills around Halifax, or even the Andes, all was 'barren and wild, of no use or advantage either to man or beast'.[36] As Thomas shows, there were throughout the seventeenth century defenders of mountains such as George Hakewill who supported them for their 'pleasing variety', and many of those who lived among them, such as Sir Daniel Fleming of Rydal Hall in the late seventeenth century, or visited them, such as the antiquary Thomas Machell from Oxford, found them perfectly pleasing and interesting.[37] What is true is that the mystic reverence of the Lake Poets, and the Romantic ardour of the tourists of the later eighteenth century, does seem to have been of an added intensity.

In his account of the changing attitudes to trees and forests, Thomas shows an ancient pattern. Wide-scale admiration of trees and planting of trees occurred from the middle ages onwards. At the upper level this was not spurred on by urbanization or industrialization, but by 'social assertiveness, aesthetic sense, patriotism and long-term profit'. It is true that, as with flowers, many new varieties were brought in from the expanding empire. But there was 'no dramatic shift from tree-destruction to tree-preservation'. The earlier liking for trees was shown in the way in which the English, from well before the eighteenth century, tried to make their cities as much like the country as possible by filling them with parks and trees. This occurred very early, and Thomas gives much evidence to show that other cities were, like Norwich in the sixteenth century, 'either a city in an orchard or an orchard in a city'. The idea of the 'Garden City', we are told, was not invented by Ebenezer Howard, but by John Evelyn in 1661.[38]

The desire from an early date to make the towns into countryside is curious for it shows an early anti-urbanism. The more conventional argument is the one pursued elsewhere by Thomas, namely of a great change some time in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. We have quoted him as saying that at the Renaissance 'the city had been synonymous with civility, the country with rusticity and boorishness', a view that still prevails in much of Europe. Why did the English come to change from this view? Thomas argues that they did so in revulsion from a too-rapid growth. Smoke, dirt, noise, overcrowding, drove the earlier city-lovers into becoming country-lovers. As the cities and industrial activities rapidly developed, so, in direct proportion, did the amount of criticism and complaint: 'there was no real precedent for the volume of late eighteenth- century complaint about the disfiguring effects of new buildings, roads, canals, tourism and industry'. Certainly the volume of complaint increased, but Thomas is also aware that the arguments themselves were not new. The strange attitude that what was useful and productive was 'most likely

[35] Thomas, *Natural World*, 228.
[36] Defoe, *Tour*, 549.
[37] Fleming, *Description*; Machell, *Antiquary*.
[38] Thomas, *Natural World*, 209, 197, 205, 206.

to be ugly and distasteful', he remarks, 'had a long pre-history', stretching back to at least the sixteenth century.[39]

This criticism of town vices is part of that pro-rural, anti-urban, bias which, we have seen, Taine observed in the nineteenth century. As Thomas points out, 'the preoccupation with nature and rural life . . . is certainly something which the English townsman has for a long time liked to think of as "peculiarly English"'. Whether it is or not, 'much of the country's literature and intellectual life has displayed a profoundly anti-urban bias'.[40] This bias was strongly manifest in the eighteenth century when, for instance, Adam Smith assumed that the natural inclinations of man' would lead everyone to want to live in the country.[41] Yet the curious desire of the English to spend as little time in towns as possible goes back much further than that.

Thomas tells us that 'even in the twelfth century it had been customary for the rich citizens of large towns to hold rural property nearby', providing them with country houses to which they could retreat.[42] In the fifteenth century, Fortescue compared England to France, where he had spent a number of years, and found a great difference. In England the countryside was 'so filled and replenished with landed men, that therein so small a thorpe [village, hamlet] can not be found wherein dwells not a knight, an esquire, or such a householder, as is there commonly called a frankelyn, enriched with great possessions'. He thought that 'after this manner . . . none other realms of the world' were so inhabited. For though there were rich and powerful men elsewhere, they lived in 'cities and walled towns'.[43]

Moving to the early sixteenth century, Thomas Starkey, 'lamented that it was impossible to persuade them [i.e. the nobility] to make their chief residence in town and deplored the "great rudeness and barbarous custom of dwelling in the country'.[44] Foreigners 'were astonished at the love of the English gentry for rural life', Trevelyan remarks. Visitors noted in amazement that 'every gentleman flieth into the country. Few inhabit cities and towns, few have any regard of them'.[45] An author in 1579 observed that 'whereas in some foreign countries gentlemen inhabited "the cities and chief towns", "our English manner" was for them "to make most abode in their country houses"'.'[46] Taine quotes the traveller Poggio, who wrote in the sixteenth century that 'among the English the nobles think shame to live in the towns; they reside in the country, withdrawn among woods and pastures; ... they give themselves to the things of the fields, sell their wool and their cattle, and do not consider such rustic profits shameful'. As Taine observes, 'the contrast between this rural life of the English nobility and the urban life of the Italian nobility' was 'very great', and he adds 'it is not less so for a Frenchman'.[47] From this evidence it again looks as if the phenomenon to be explained, namely the pro-rural bias, is both unusual and had developed long before the industrial and urban revolution. It is an added irony that the most anti-urban of countries should be the first major urban and industrial nation in the world. It is worth remembering this internal contradiction in sentiments and attitudes which has persisted up to the present.

If it, is indeed the case that much of what occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was merely an accentuation, an increase in volume and 'pace, rather than a complete break, we may

[39] Thomas, *Natural World*, 247.
[40] Thomas, *Natural World*, 14.
[41] Smith, *Wealth*, I, 403.
[42] Thomas, *Natural World*, 247.
[43] Fortescue, *Learned Commendation*, 66-7.
[44] Thomas, *Natural World*, 247.
[45] Quoted in Trevelyan, *Social History*, 127.
[46] Thomas, *Natural World*, 247.
[47] Taine, *Notes*, 141.

wonder how we are to explain the patterns that already seem to have been established by 1600, and sometimes well before. Industrialism, urbanism, the political dislocation of the seventeenth century, and even the Reformation seem, in themselves, too late or too little to explain those deep-seated peculiarities which Thomas has reminded us of. These are a curious attitude to animals, to gardens, to the city and to other natural phenomena. One central suggestion made by Thomas is that as man gained control over nature his attitude could become more positive. When there is a battle for survival against the wild, then sympathy and tenderness are difficult; but once mastery is gained, a feeling that care and protection is needed can grow. Instead of animals being dangerous, they are endangered. If we pursue this explanation, there are good grounds for believing that the domestication of the natural and human world that allowed a relaxed attitude was already achieved well before 1600.

The landscape, the physical world of forests, marshes, moors and meadows had been early conquered and brought into the full control of man in England. As Thomas shows, following the work of H. C. Darby and historical geographers, the physical landscape had been tamed and ordered by the eleventh century, if not earlier. The shape of the fields and hedges, of the roads and paths, of the majority of human settlements, had been laid out by the eleventh century and was to change little over the next 700 years. Dangerous wild animals, which still roamed over much of continental Europe or Scotland until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were destroyed very early. In the sixteenth century Harrison thought it one of the important blessings of God on England 'that it is void of noisome beasts, as lions, bears, tigers, pards [leopards], wolves, and suchlike, by means whereof our countrymen may travel in safety and our herds and flocks remain for the most part abroad in the field without any herdmen or keeper'.[48] He compared this with the situation beyond the Tweed, where fierce animals abounded. The perceived safety of the countryside went back much earlier. In the early thirteenth century the English monk Bartholomaeus Anglicus noted that in England there were 'few wolves or none' and as a result sheep could be securely left 'without ward in pasture and in fields'. This, he said, went back to Anglo-Saxon times, and had been a phenomenon noted by Bede.'[49]

Even more dangerous than animal predators are human ones, and it is they who usually make it necessary for armed shepherds to guard the flocks. As important as the control of the physical world of nature was the control of human violence through political and legal means. Here again it would seem that England had been early tamed. England was a unified nation-state in Anglo-Saxon times and the continuing uncertainties, regional oppositions and over-mighty subjects were, in the main, eliminated by the strong governments of the Normans and Angevins. Internal warfare and invading armies, which made much of Europe dangerous and led to a weapon-carrying population and the defensive fortifications of nobility and cities- up to the nineteenth century, had largely been eliminated by the early medieval period in England. The power of the King's Courts, the absence of a standing army, the freedom from foreign invasions provided by sea boundaries, these and other factors combined to give a very early and continuous peace. Of course it was broken occasionally, as in the Wars of the Roses, or in Stephen and Matilda's reign. But the contrast with the devastations of France, Germany, Spain or Italy through the centuries is very marked. The differences in political structure, if further investigated, would help to explain the curious fact that the English gentry were happy to live in undefended manor houses in the country, while in most countries they sheltered within huge chateau fortifications or, preferably, within the city walls. Towns and castles were the refuge of 'civility' and 'civilization' when times were violent, and hence were far more important on the Continent. It is for these reasons that Freeman, for instance, when

[48] Harrison, *Description*, 324.
[49] Anglicus, *Properties*, II, 734.

trying to explain the absence of 'capital' cities in England, ascribed it to political factors. The 'princely' and the 'civic' element show themselves in greater splendour in French rather than English cities 'simply because in England the kingdom was more united, because the general government was stronger, because the English earl or bishop was not an independent prince, nor the English city an independent commonwealth.[50] Edinburgh or Durham was the nearest British equivalents to such a phenomenon.

This relative political security provided by a powerful and early nation-state was an essential background to an economic world which was also unusually secure, and over which ordinary people had an unusually developed control. The wealth of medieval England is still impressive to us today in its numerous surviving churches and houses. Accounts of the population at the time both from literary sources such as Chaucer, or from economic historians, suggest a world which had already escaped from the subsistence level of periodic famine which dogged much of Europe until the eighteenth century. There is no documented national, or even large regional, famine for England from the Norman Conquest onwards. The clothing, the food, the housing, the amount of personal goods and money that are revealed by the records from the thirteenth century onwards suggests that this was a relatively affluent agricultural society. Disease was the great uncertainty, but this is an insecurity with which we still live. This was not a desperate world ceaselessly poised on the edge of starvation, unable to 'afford' the luxury of appreciating natural beauty as an end in itself in its desperate struggle to survive. It was from very early on, in Thomas's terms, a society which had the wealth and leisure to treat animals and flowers and trees as ends and not merely as means, as things to joy and delight in, as well as to use.

The economic security was part of a particular mode of production whose later refinement we call capitalism. It is worth considering whether, as Marx and Weber both in their own ways suggested, this mode of production produces a curious and paradoxical attitude to the environment, a contradictory attitude of alienation on the one hand and sentimental attachment on the other. In capitalism, land and human labour are treated as means to an end, as commodities to buy and sell on the market. In theory, everything has a price and is placed on one scale in the market. Yet, paradoxically, as most relations become contractual and commercialized, as farming is pursued almost solely for profit, as the business ethic intrudes into all relations, a counter tendency builds up. A stronger and stronger boundary is erected between this utilitarian approach to most things and certain reserved areas which are carefully kept outside the market mentality. It is emphasized that flowers and pets, favourite trees and mountains, have no price and cannot be measured by the usual standards. Their uselessness is their value, they are particularly treasured because they are of no commercial utility. Thus pets must not be eaten, trees must not be cut down and burnt, mountains are bare and desolate, flowers are transitory and like the lily of the field neither do they weave nor do they spin. The human heart caught in the restless striving of constant calculative capitalism rejoices in these havens of non-utility.

Since the peculiarities we are trying to understand pre-date rapid urbanization and industrialization, but are parallel to the early development of a particular form of individualistic capitalism in England from the middle ages, it seems more likely that the explanation lies in some 'elective affinity' between the spirit of capitalism and the love of certain parts of nature. It would seem that the very early development of money relations, markets and capitalistic relations of production in England not only helped to provide the wealth and security which was a necessary precondition for the disinterested appreciation of nature, but also those curious ambivalences which

[50] Freeman, *Essays*, 42.

make capitalist societies simultaneously the most exploitative and the most protective towards nature.[51]

A closely related feature was the nature of literacy. The widespread dominance of money and contractual relations from early on was made possible by the very developed use of writing on parchment or paper. One of the powerful messages of Keith Thomas's book is the way in which the growth of printing and a public which devoured the literature devoted to 'nature' powerfully influenced the development of an interest in the countryside. But the impact of written communication went deeper than this, for it seems likely that a very developed use of writing to record and transmit information from at least the thirteenth century in England influenced the concepts of the natural world. The use of the written mode had spread so widely that it helped to undermine the normal opposition between urban, literate, high culture, and a rural, illiterate, oral 'little community'. Hence the widespread 'learned errors' to which Thomas has drawn our attention; hence the rapid spread of new fashions and tastes with regard to natural objects, hence the relative absence, as compared to much of Europe, of great regional diversities in taste. These effects of literacy in breaking down oppositions and in exerting control have been well analysed by Jack Goody.[52] Their later development at the popular level of a very large chapbook literature has also been documented.[53] Just as the political and economic and physical worlds had become tamed, controlled and ordered, so the world of information and thought had been reduced to orderliness on parchment and paper.

At one point Thomas links the psychological function of pets to their attractiveness within a modern, atomistic, kinship system.[54] This intriguing suggestion could be broadened. In the majority of societies, a combination of early marriage, constant childbearing, the close physical and emotional presence of numerous kin, together provide the emotional satisfactions which many people now find in their pets. Now that we know that this individualistic~ kinship and marriage system is very old in England, probably dating in its central features to at least the thirteenth century if not before, it is not difficult to see that pet-keeping and a fondness for nature are very early and related phenomena. Just as English children were luxuries, regarded as superior pets,[55] so English pets were luxuries, regarded as alternative children. The boundaries between the animal and the human, and between the exploitation and preservation of species are complex. We see in England over the centuries that through a careful classification of the world into tame and wild, edible and inedible, it was possible for our ancestors, as it still is for us, to be great meat-eaters and yet greatly devoted to particular animals and concerned with animal cruelty.

A final strand of the explanation of the peculiarities undoubtedly lies in the religious system. Keith Thomas, following Weber, rightly lays considerable stress on this. Christianity in general has a curiously ambivalent attitude towards the relations between man and nature. On the one hand it stresses an exploitative attitude; all creatures were made by God for man, and can be used for his own good. On the other hand, all creatures were created by God, and man should respect His creation and see His hand in its beauty. The myth of the Garden of Eden is an aspect of the rural emphasis of the religion. Within Christianity, the proto-Protestant and Protestant versions that dominated England stressed an anti-magical, disenchanted attitude towards nature which Weber noted. Long before the Reformation, many of the uncertainties, mysteries and extensive ritual confusions had been eliminated. An overlap of the material and spiritual worlds common in most

[51] For some similar arguments see Williams, *Country and City*, 295ff.
[52] Goody, *Domestication*.
[53] Spufford, *Books*.
[54] Thomas, *Natural World*, 119.
[55] Macfarlane, *Marriage*, 54-6.

cultures was absent. The attack on those popular errors which indicated a fear and awe of nature, the undermining of a belief in divine presences in natural phenomena, had begun long ago under the Anglo-Saxon Church. It was carried to its logical and final limits by Protestantism. An ascetic, anti-magical tendency in Christianity thus fitted with the other forces, political, economic, social, which separated the world of man and nature, bringing nature under absolute control, and then allowing a sentimental re-integration on man's own terms. This disenchantment of the world is the central theme of Thomas's work and he summarizes the process thus: 'in place of a natural world redolent with human analogy and symbolic meaning, and sensitive to man's behaviour, they constructed a detached natural scene to be viewed and studied from the outside'.[56] In Keats and Wordsworth and Shelley we see the last fading of the links, 'fled is that music, do I wake or sleep?'

If we return to the paradoxes with which we started, which surprised visitors to England in the nineteenth century and still lie deep in English society and in many of the parts of the world where British culture was exported, we have an explanation at two levels. By 1500, and even more obviously by 1650, the preconditions for the peculiar attitudes to animals, plants and the countryside were already established. This was a result of the political, economic, social and religious factors briefly mentioned above. There may also have been other cultural factors which cannot be pursued here, but are worth mentioning. It is well known from the earliest descriptions by Tacitus that the Germanic invaders of the essentially town-based Roman civilization preferred the countryside to the towns. In much of Europe these rural peoples were absorbed into the Roman world, and finally the town-dominated world of Rome re-established itself with Roman law, religion, language and cities. England and northern Europe were less influenced by Rome, and in England the law, language and settlement patterns were almost exclusively Germanic through the three waves of Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Norman settlers. That Germanic preference for the countryside was never erased and has, curiously, been preserved in the midst of the first industrial and urban society.

These early preconditions and deep cultural preferences were then given a particular twist by the events after the sixteenth century. In a period which saw unprecedented population growth in England from the 1730s, the mastery of a new and artificial form of production in industrialization, the first rapid urbanization in the world, and the exploration and domination over half the world, these earlier tendencies were not wiped out but, in some ways, became stronger. Rather than quenching the love of animals, trees, country living, the effects of cities and industries and a growing dominance of market values was to emphasize these feelings. The period of most rapid growth of the new features in the later eighteenth century also saw the height of the alternative tendency in the Romantic Movement. The extraordinary increase in the volume of emotion and interest in the natural world thus fits with the growth of an apparently hostile environment. Rather than trying to eliminate the contradictions, it is more useful to understand how the dilemmas arose and why many felt pulled in opposite directions. The struggles of the tendencies in capitalism have reached global proportions and the outcome in Amazonia, the Himalayas, the world's oceans will affect us all.

[56] Thomas, *Natural World*, 89.