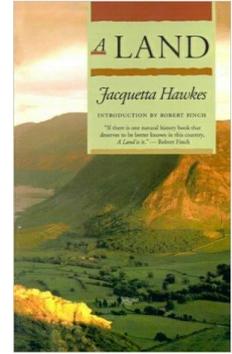


# Jacquetta Hawkes : A Land

Beacon Press 1991 (1951)

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*This celebrated classic offers a sort of conversation between poetry and geology – wandering through the landscape of Britain and responding to it: 'I have used the findings of the two sciences of geology and archaeology for purposes altogether unscientific. I have tried to use them evocatively, and the image I have sought to evoke is of an entity, the land of Britain, in which past and present, nature, man and art appear all in one piece. xix*



Italics – my notes. Normal font – extracts.

## 1. Two Themes

*She lies in her London back garden and thinks:*

By night I have something of the same feeling about cats that I have always, and far more strongly, about birds: that perfectly formed while men were still brutal, they now represent the continued presence of the past. Once birds sang and flirted among the leaves while men, more helpless and less accomplished, skulked between the trunks below them. Now they linger in the few trees that men have left standing, or fit themselves into the chinks of the human world, into its church towers, lamp-posts and gutters. It is quite illogical that this emotion should be concentrated on birds; insects, for example, look, and are, more ancient. Perhaps it is evoked by the singing, whistling and calling that fell into millions of ancestral ears and there left images that we all inherit. The verses of medieval poets are full of birds as though in them these stored memories had risen to the surface. Once in the spring I stood at the edge of some Norfolk ploughland listening to the mating calls of the plover that were tumbling ecstatically above the fields. The delicious effusions of turtle doves bubbled from a coppice at my back. It seemed to me that I had my ear to a great spiral shell and that these sounds rose from it. The shell was the vortex of time, and as the birds themselves took shape, species after species, so their distinctive songs were formed within them and had been spiralling up ever since. Now, at the very lip of the shell, they reached my present ear. 8

Always change, and yet at this moment, at every given moment, the outline of Britain, like all outlines, has reality and significance. It is the endless problem of the philosophers; either they give process, energy, its due and neglect its formal limitations, or they look only at forms and forget the irresistible power of change. The answers to all the great secrets are hidden somewhere in this thicket, those of ethics and aesthetics as well as of metaphysics.

I know of no philosophy that can disprove that this land, having achieved this moment, was not always bound to achieve it, or that I, because I exist, was not always inevitably coming into existence. It is therefore as an integral part of the process that I claim to tell the story of the creation of what is at present known as Britain, a land which has its own unmistakable shape at this moment of time.

There are many ways in which this story can be told, just as a day in the life of this house behind me could be described in terms of its intake of food and fuel, and its corresponding output through drains, dustbins and chimneys, or in terms of the movement in space and time of its occupants, or of their emotional relationships. All these forms, even the most material, would be in some sense creations of the storyteller's mind, and for this reason the counterpoint to the theme of the creation of a land shall be the growth of consciousness, its gradual concentration and intensification within the human skull.

That consciousness has now reached a stage in its growth at which it is impelled to turn back to recollect happenings in its own past which it has, as it were, forgotten. In the history of thought, this is the age of history. Some forms of these lost memories lie in the unconscious strata of mind itself, these dark, rarely disturbed layers that have accumulated, as mould accumulates in a forest, through the shedding of innumerable lives since the beginning of life. In its search for these forms consciousness is working, not always I think very sensitively, through its psychologists. I am certainly involved in their findings, but as narrator am not concerned with them. Instead I am concerned with other forms of memory, those recollections of the world and of man that are pursued on behalf of consciousness by geologists and archaeologists.

10-11

## 2. Creation

Although I WAS born into a world which, at least in my part of it, had long made itself aware that it was not a plate but a sphere, and that it was the servant and not the master of the sun, I was not born too late to absorb some misconceptions from my nurse. Indeed I kept an unquestioned belief in one of these errors until only the other day, and I am therefore probably right to assume that many of my fellows believe in it still. I grew up with the simple image of Earth as a globe with an outer skin that was hard and cool but which grew progressively hotter and more wholly molten towards an unimaginably hot and molten centre. This picture, I now learn, is incorrect. Enormously the greater part of the earth's sphere is very dense, perhaps an alloy of iron and nickel. It is this metallic mass which draws the compass needle so faithfully to the north and which made the iron filings scattered by our physics

mistress on a sheet of foolscap dance so mysteriously and form radiate patterns over the northern end of the magnet lying below the paper. The core is enclosed in an outer layer about seven hundred miles thick which may have risen to the surface when the earth was still fiery hot, as the dross rises when ores are smelted, or as scum rises on boiling jam. The dross layer as it formed further divided itself into two parts, a heavy lower one of basalt and an upper one which on cooling crystallized into granite. This granite froth formed the first land masses of the world.

In deep mines men work naked and stream with sweat even when far above snow is falling on their houses. A few miles further down and the heat would become insupportable, deeper again and any shaft would begin to heave and close in, for it would have reached a depth at which the rock substance was molten. Whatever the temperature at the heart of the globe may be, radio-activity in the lower parts of its outer layer produces heat that accumulates in its deep imprisonment until it reaches such intensity that the substance melts. Only a score of miles below the surface on which we walk the crust is molten, though probably held rigid by the pressure of the solid rocks above. So the picture I formed in the nursery is not fundamentally misleading; we do in fact maintain our fragile lives on a wafer balanced between a hellish morass and unlimited space. Even that wafer wears thin, a fact accounting for many of the most stirring events in the history of the earth. In spite of the claims of gravestone merchants, granite can be gradually worn away by the combined and almost continuous assault of sun and frost, wind and water, and Earth's skin of granite was so worn. But what is weathered away is not lost, it must be redeposited elsewhere at a lower level, often under water. It was in this way that granite became the basic stuff of the sedimentary rocks that now form the greater part of our landscape. Since life began it has, of course, added immeasurably to these rocks, building up vast thicknesses from shells, corals, the minute bodies of foraminifera, chemical deposits provoked by algae, from the accumulation of forests and peat bogs. But it began with granite and the basalt that spouted up when the hard skin cracked. It is curious to think that granite and basalt, with H<sub>2</sub>O, N, and CO<sub>2</sub>, the water and early atmosphere of earth, have made all the material paraphernalia with which man now surrounds himself, the skyscraper, the wine-glass, the vacuum cleaner, jewels, the mirror into which I look. And the woman who looks? Where did it come from, this being behind the eyes, this thing that asks? How has this been gleaned from a landscape of harsh rock and empty seas?

But to return to the wafer, and to the statement that it wears thin. The irregularities of the earth's surface at the present time are slight enough—five miles up to the summit of the highest mountains, six miles down to the deepest seabeds—less relatively than those of a smooth-skinned orange. Yet even this slight irregularity is always under attack by the powers already named, by sun and frost, wind and water, which erode the heights, transporting them grain by grain and molecule by molecule to add them to the low ground or to fill the hollows of the sea. Could this go on long enough a dead level would result and we should all perforce be plain-dwellers. There are many agencies working towards the achievement of rest, of quiescence. Gravity itself does much, through landslides, through streams and torrents that tear and batter their beds and carry down grits, pebbles, stones and boulders as their waters rush back to sea level. Frost splits, wind catches up grits and uses them like sandpaper to smooth and wear down exposed rock surfaces. The alternating heat and cold of day and night causes rock to swell and to retract until, weary of the process, its outer skin flakes off and is carried away by wind or water. To this last form of levelling down the geologists, who usually prefer such terms as isostatic readjustment, have given the pleasing name of onion weathering.

16-17

*The irregularity of the planet's surface is under constant attack by the weather, which erodes the heights and transport them to the levels and to the sea – eventually the whole thing would be flat.*

*2 kinds of sedimentary rocks:*

- *Sandstones & clays – formed by deposition*
- *Limestones & dolomites – formed by precipitation*

*When a mountain range is formed by the folding of sedimentary rocks during volcanic upheavals, the molten substance pushes up into the gaps left between the folds, and forms a hard core which remains once the folds themselves have been worn away – thus Dartmoor, Land's End, the Scillies, the only remains of ranges which were once 10x their present height.*

*So our land is made up of sedimentary rocks formed in long periods of denudation, and igneous or fiery rocks which have at many different times broken through them. A third group, the metamorphic rocks, have been created by the action of the fiery rocks on the sedimentaries, and by the pressure cause by earth movement. Thus granites are changed into gneiss, clay and shale into slate, limestone into marble, sandstone into quartzite.*

Because they have no dangerous young mountains, Englishmen migrate in numbers to the Alps. Those who believe exclusively in the power of economic forces would think how many things men will pursue in their lands beside material products. They will move in their thousands for the sake of wide views and sandy beaches, for singularity and danger. 23

*There are just 4 live volcanoes left in Europe – Vesuvius, Etna, Stromboli, Mt Hekla in Iceland.*

Although the Caledonian and Armorican foldings have left us some wild country and the possibility of solitude, Britain, without volcanoes or Alps or forests, is in general a gentle and domesticated land that seems to be wholly under our control. Yet it is not really controlled. Lie awake at night even in our composed Britain and think how the land about you is changing every hour, as surely as your own body and as irresistibly. Here small avalanches are spilling down cliffs, there miniature land spits are drawing clear of the sea, everywhere the hills are being attacked and worn away. If ears were keen enough, we should be able to hear the rustle of perpetual movement, a stirring of the silence not much greater than that made by the petal of a flower as it opens or closes. 24

### 3. Recollection

It fell to the Victorians to survey the welter of time and space and to decide to discipline it, to give it outlines and pin down the resulting shapes with labels bearing names and numbers. Through their force and conviction, their ability to create ideal forms in the flux of process, vast fragments of 'time' are, for as long as Western civilization endures, known to the rest of mankind by names formed by our tongues for our land.

There are pre-Cambrian and Cambrian, labels for those inconceivably remote ages when life was organizing itself from its first vague essays into the already shapely and delicate creatures that swarmed in the silence of Cambrian seas. The name derives from Cambria, the word used by our seventeenth-century antiquaries as a romantic title for Wales. The Silures and Ordovices were the Celtic tribes dominant in Wales at the end of the Iron Age who died in thousands among the mountains they strove to defend against the Roman armies. Their hands and feet must have been familiar with the detail of the rocks over which they fought, and it is suitable that their names should have passed into those of the periods when the rocks were formed—the Ordovician and Silurian. As it happened, the first of these names was not established without a struggle. Those greatly possessed men, the geologists Adam Sedgwick and Roderick Murchison, fought until death over the labelling of certain Welsh rocks which one wished to call Upper Cambrian and the other Lower Silurian. It was only after the bodies of both these men, abandoned by consciousness, were simple chemistry once more, that it was agreed by their successors to recognize the disputed rocks as a new division, and to give it a name, the Ordovician, which, as one of them said, commemorated the 'last and most valiant of the old Cambrian tribes'. The following age has the name of a most English county. Devon is now always to be linked with the formations in which the first vertebrate fishes appear, those slender begin-flings of our own manly spines. The Permian celebrates discoveries made by Murchison, even though he made them outside his own country, while Carboniferous and Cretaceous refer to English coal and English chalk. Even for the Tertiary era when the character of the geological names changes sharply, the Victorians are still in command. Eocene, Oligocene and the rest were names devised by Charles Lyell in whose mind they took shape as a result of the classical education given him by Victorian England. So a sound, 'eos', uttered by Greeks at the sight of Mediterranean dawns, was carried in memory to be applied to some English clays and sands and the age which they represent—the early morning of the mammals.

32-33

### 5. Creation of the Mountain Country

In the heart of the hunting shires, at Charnwood Forest in Leicestershire, cutting through the sandstones and marls of Triassic times, the remains of pre-Cambrian rocks rise in shattered ridges. They are hard, many of them with the intense hardness of quartzite, and without memory of life. These ancient rocks are exposed again, and more boldly, in the Highlands, along the western fringes of Scotland and in the Western Isles. Among the oldest of all are the gneisses of the Outer Hebrides, rocks whose immense experience of the world has made them hard, but exquisitely fine-grained. It is quite useless to try to reconstruct the map of pre-Cambrian times... There are signs of periods of mountain building and of remote Ice Ages, but they are dim and worn by the passage of time.

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*Geology begins with the Cambrian Age, a period when sea dominated land. Britain was underwater, and a vast continent united S America, Africa, Arabia, S India and Australia – Gondwanaland. Cambrian rocks are exposed in N Wales, Isle of Man, NW Scotland and Shropshire (Long Mynd). A great Cambrian ridge lies beneath southern England, buried by later deposits. The oldest Cambrian rocks are quartzites, sandstones, limestones; and then shale (formed of mud). Finally, the slates of N Wales, now the finest roofing material in the world, mud folded and faulted and pressed. The earliest records of life come from the Cambrian [ie pre-Cambrian is the geological prehistoric]. The land was barren, but in the sea were creatures with skeletons, leaving the first fossils. The masters of the seas were trilobites, the first creatures with eyes. Also sponges, forming limestones and reefs. Cambrian was followed by Ordovician, when Britain was still mostly under the sea, but the Cambrian crust cracked and magma surged up to form Snowdonia. New invertebrates and corals formed, sea-urchins. Ordovician became Silurian, and the Mendips were formed from volcanic activity. Organic limestones formed where the sea was shallow – Wenlock Edge. Plant life began to form where there was land (not in Britain). Caledonian and Devonian followed, with the creation of mountain chains, the Highlands, Cumbria, N Wales – then as high as the Alps and Himalayas, now worn down, with sediment forming the sandstone of Scottish valleys and fertile soil the Midlands. And now we find the fossils of fish. Then the Carboniferous, with plants and animals. Further volcanic folding in the Permian Age created the Pennines, Malverns, S Welsh mountains, Cornwall and Devon – the heat creating reserves of tin and other ores. All these ages are known collectively by the name Palaeozoic.*

### 6. Creation of the Lowlands

*Triassic – most of England lay under a shallow lake, with the mountains sticking up as islands. Then during the Jurassic England was again under open sea, with only the Highlands and part of E Anglia remaining; this sea created the Jurassic belt, the strip of country running diagonally from Dorset to the Yorkshire moors. This belt later provided the one open thoroughfare across central England, and Bath, Portland and Purbeck marble from which our most beautiful buildings would be made; also the ironstone of Northants, Lincolnshire and Yorks, which has determined the pattern of industrial development. The Jurassic seas alternated clays/shales with limestone laid down in warm, shallow water, full of corals, sea lilies, and the first crabs. Purbeck marble is formed of water snails from*

*a fresh water lagoon in Dorset. So Jurassic water snails, their individual lives commemorated by murky scribbings on the surface of the marble, helped medieval Christians to praise their God. 76.*

The land surrounding these lakes and lagoons was rich in vegetation and animal life – dinosaurs. We had steogosaurs.

*Then the Cretaceous – without Chalk there could be no Albion, and there would have been no Chalk without the Cretaceous seas. Australia was separate, and Britain was still joined to Greenland/America/S.America/Africa. The sea was rising, and remained constant for 30m years, laying down 1 foot of chalk per 30,000 years on the seabed as rivers brought calcium carbonate which interacted with microscopic marine plants to form chalk. The Folkestone cliffs represent 120,000 years. The skeletons of sponges formed the beds of flint seaming the chalk, later becoming the subject of the first mines in Britain. Reptiles still dominated, but mammals were learning how to make a placenta. Plants took off, with the old fern and cycad vegetation giving way to the first deciduous plants which could put out true flowers. And thus insects. And thus seasons.*

*The Caenozoic saw the continents assume their present form. Britain still belonged as much to N America as to Europe, from which it was separated by a narrow sea. The earth's crust now suffered its last violent disturbances, with the creation of the Alps and Himalayas, 30m years ago – still lofty and jagged. The shocks of the Alps caused the old rocks of NW Scotland to split, magma to flow out and basalt to form. Alter this miniature landscape gardening (for such it seems by comparison with continental Alpine convulsion) the main structure of our land was complete by the close of the Miocene Age. The remaining dozen million years only modified the design.*

*In the Pliocene sea levels were higher, and gravels laid down on the heaths which lie amongst the North Downs – hence Hampstead and Highgate, their poor soils making them unsuitable for cultivation and development.*

*Mammals continued to develop – the ancestors of our cows and horses being about the size of fox terriers!*

Among all the mammals which were making experiments in living before the Ice Age, the primates were proving most successful. It seems that man, like the elephant, originated in Africa. Manlike apes, such as the decorously named species, Proconsul, evolved in the continent which their descendants were to call dark. In Africa, too, eros so strengthened their mounting consciousness that these creatures began to use, and even to shape, sticks and stones to help them to secure and prepare their food. Consciousness was concentrating itself in their still simian skulls. First life and now consciousness had grown from that pre-Cambrian planet of granite and water. As colours intensified in birds and then in flowers, so consciousness was intensifying through the apes, the man-like apes and primitive man. After this point there was no going back, the development of the human mind, the isolation of the human being lay at the end of the road that was then chosen. Yet even now the citadels of individual self-consciousness are always being stormed by death, and even in life we surrender them every day to sleep. It seems a part of some urge to reverse the process of intensification, to let mind return to its matrix. Sometimes when I am tired and consumed by a longing for sleep, a gentle but irresistible invasion from the outer world seems to take possession of me and I feel that consciousness wishes only to flow back into that world and dissolve there. Rilke wrote of 'gold':

The ore is homesick. It is eager  
to leave the mints and turning wheels  
that offer it a life so meagre  
from cofflers and from factories.  
It would flow back into the veins  
of gaping mountains whence it came,  
that close upon it once again.

From the end of the Caenozoic it was too late, consciousness was bound, at least for a spell, to the coffers and the factories.

When the temperate climate of Pliocene times was giving way before the intense cold of the Pleistocene Ice Age the transfer of Britain's geographical allegiance from the North American continent to Europe was complete. The British area formed a bulge on the western extremity of a European continent, while the sea had made its decisive break between it and Greenland. Ireland was already cut off, and lay as an island oil the coast of the bulge.

It is now almost as familiar as 1066 that 'the Ice Age may be divided into four main glacial periods divided by warmer interglacials. At the first onset of the cold, vast ice sheets reached Britain from Scandinavia, but in the later cold phases the icesheets and glaciers were home-produced, originating in the mountains of Wales, north-eastern England and Scotland. The ice attained its greatest extent during the second glaciation when its southern limits ran from the mouth of the Severn to the north side of the mouth of the Thames. 92-93

*The ice began to retreat only 20,000 years ago. Tundra → pine → oak, elm, lime and finally beech (only 2-3000 years ago). Britain was now detached from the European continent, and became warmer.*

After about 6000 BC the greatest changes in the personality of Britain were to be made by men.

I have recalled something of the creation of the land of Britain during five hundred million years. Piece by piece through all the changes of time the stuff of Britain has accumulated and has been carved to its present shape – piece by piece, advancing always from the ancient rocks of the north-west to the young clays, sands and gravels of the south-east. At the end of it, no country has a more complex structure and more various scenery than our own. Together with this creation of a country I have recalled the strengthening of consciousness to the point at which in the mind of man it was ready to turn upon the land that had nourished it. Apart from the few great upheavals in the earth's crust, natural change can never have had so rapid or so conspicuous an effect as those wrought by men during the last ten thousand years. From their first tentative experiments at felling trees with flint axes, they have cleared whole regions of forest, have made lakes, drained fens and changed the course of rivers, they have honeycombed the Carboniferous strata and burnt much of them, they have plundered the accumulations of many ages and used the plunder to cover

the surface of the country with roads, houses and cities. They have changed plants and animals to serve their own ends with ten thousand times the speed of evolution, and, by substituting these creations of their own for the natural animals and vegetation, have completed the transformation of the land. 98-99.

## 7. Digression on rocks, soils and men

Up and down the country, whether they have been set up men, isolated by weathering, or by melting ice, conspicuous stones are commonly identified with human beings. Most our Bronze Age circles and menhirs have been thought by the country people living round them to be men or women turned to stone. The names often help to express this indention and its implied sense of kinship; Long Meg and her daughters, the Nine Maidens, the Bridestone and the Merry Maidens. It is right that they should most often be seen as omen, for somewhere in the mind of everyone is an awareness of woman as earth, as rock, as matrix. In all these legends human beings have seen themselves melting back into rock, in their imaginations must have pictured the body, limbs and hair melting into smoke and solidifying into these blocks of sandstone, limestone and granite. 101

Building is one of the activities relating men most directly to their land. Everyone who travels inside Britain knows those sudden changes between region and region, from areas where houses are built of brick or of timber and daub and fields are hedged, to those where houses are of stone and fields enclosed by drystone walling. Everywhere in the ancient mountainous country of the west and north stone is taken for granted; where the sudden appearance of walls instead of hedges catches the eye is along the belt of Jurassic limestones, often sharply delimited. The change is most dramatic in Lincolnshire where the limestone of Lincoln Edge is not more than a few miles wide and the transformation from hedges to the geometrical austerity of dry-walling, from the black and white, red and buff of timber and brick to the melting greys of limestone buildings, is extraordinarily abrupt. The distinctive qualities of the stones of each geological age and of each region powerfully affect the architecture raised up from them; if those qualities precisely meet particular needs then, of course, the stones are carried out of their own region. Since the eighteenth century the value of special qualities in building material has greatly outweighed the labour of transport, and stones of many kinds have not only been carried about Britain to places far from those where they were originally formed, but have been sent overseas to all parts of the world. Men, in fact, have proved immensely more energetic than rivers or glaciers in transporting and mixing the surface deposits of the planet.

Now the process has gone too far; what was admirable when it concerned only the transport of the finest materials to build the greatest buildings has become damnable when dictated by commercial expediency. The cheapness of modern haulage has blurred the clear outlines of locality in this as in all other ways; slate roofs appear among Norfolk reed beds, red brick and tile in the heart of stone country, while cities weigh down the land with huge masses of stone, brick, iron, steel, and artificial marble dragged indiscriminately from far and near.

Nevertheless, there are still regional differences that will hardly disappear. Britain would sink below the sea before a Yorkshireman would buy Scottish granite to build his town hall, or an Aberdonian outrage his granite city with a bank of Millstone Grit. The danger is that Britain will not sink below the sea, but simply into a new form of undifferentiated chaos, when both Yorkshireman and Scot adopt artificial stone and chromium hung on boxes of steel and concrete. 105-06

*And yet stone has always been moved about the country – the blue stones of Stonehenge, the Caen stone of the early Middle Ages; lots of Normandy limestone for our cathedrals. The genes of the Norman conquerors are now mingled with those of most of our royal and noble families, and through them also Caen stone has been incorporated in our most sacred national buildings - old St Paul's, Canterbury Cathedral, Westminster Abbey. 107*

*Stone was usually shipped for church buildings and castles. Ely cathedral and the great East Anglian churches and abbeys, as well as the early Cambridge Colleges, are built from stone from Barnack in Northants. King's College is built from Yorkshire limestone (lower levels) and Jurassic stone from Northants (upper levels), with the fan vaulting again from Yorks.*

The centre of gravity of a people in any age may be expected to be found in the objects for which they will transport great quantities of building material. Neolithic communities hauled megalithic blocks to their communal tombs, Bronze Age men did the same for their temples, the Iron Age Celts amassed materials for their tribal strongholds, the Romans for their military works and public buildings; medieval society sweated for its churches, colleges and castles. An exceptionally abrupt transition is shown when in Tudor times not only was much new material taken to build mansions and palaces, but great quantities of stone were actually carried away from religious buildings for these secular uses. With the exception of the building and rebuilding of London churches, until the end of the eighteenth century stone continued to be transported mainly to great town and country houses or occasionally to public buildings. The Victorians moved unprecedented masses of stone for town halls, exchanges, museums, government offices, Houses of Parliament, as well as for factories and docks. In the twentieth century material, no longer usually in its natural state, has been concentrated on vast industrial offices, power stations, luxury flats, central and local government offices and once again, though with moderation, on schools and colleges. We have also practised a wholesale adaptation of buildings (mostly from private to public purposes) which seems to indicate a lack of vitality. 108

*Granite – used for the earliest tombs, standing stones, sacred avenues, but not quarried for building till the C18th. Victorians loved its permanence – it became kerbstones, bridges, post offices, banks. The oldest Cambrian and pre-Cambrian rocks do not make good building stone, having been shattered and faulted over hundreds of millions of years. You can't even use them for drystone walling. The exception is the Welsh slates. Devonian sandstone is good, in the Midlands. Caithness stone contains bitumen from the fish embedded into them, and makes flagstones and megalithic tombs; it's virtually waterproof. The oldest furniture in Britain is made from it, in Skara*

*Brae in the early Bronze Age in Orkney. The dour grey and brown Carboniferous rocks made C19th northern prisons, stations, town halls. The warm colours of the Permian and Triassic Ages glows pleasantly in local churches. The limestones used for the Houses of Parliament, though, looked lovely but was quarried without thought, and began to crumble. Jurassic limestone produced the Cotswolds (and Douling stone Wells cathedral and Glastonbury Abbey). Men and sheep and the limestone hills have together made the Cotswold realm, with its small unchanging towns and church-proud villages, its hamlets and country houses, surely one of the most lovely stretches of rural urbanity in the world. 122.*

*Early Oxford, however, is built from a rough ragstone produced by coral reefs. Too many buildings were built from this cheap stone; whereas Cambridge, having no local quarries, turned to Northants, and then to the dissolved fenland abbeys of Romsey, Thorney, Barnwell, which built Corpus and King's. When all that ran out they turned to Rutland and Links limestones- eg Ketton stone, which made Trinity library and Neville's Court. The C17-18th turned to Bath and Portland stone; fireburnt London is reconstructed from it. Cretaceous chalk is no use for building, but the sarsen which comes with it is.*

The chalk had an understanding of it which enabled them to use it effectively for farms and barns and even for their parish churches. Fortunately in some regions, and particularly on Salisbury Plain and the Wessex downlands in the heart of the chalk country, a stone occurs in natural association with the chalk that also combines admirably with it in building. These are the **sarsens** which now lie on the surface of the downs, the hardest fragments surviving from a layer which once covered the chalk but which has been worn away. These sarsen stones owe their name to something strange in their appearance; the country people called them Saracens because they felt that these harsh, angular blocks were alien to the yielding curves of the chalk on which they lay. A seventeenth-century soldier antiquary wrote of one Wessex village that it was 'a place so full of grey pibble stones of great bignes as is not usually scene; they break them and build their houses of them and walls, laying mosse betweene, the inhabitants call them Saracens stones, and in this parish, a mile and a halfe in length, they lie so thick as you may go upon them all the way. They call that place the Grey-weather, because afar off they looke like a flock of sheepe.'

In their own right the sarsens have a most honourable place in these memoirs. Because they had already been quarried by water, frost and wind they provided the best possible material for masons with a rough equipment of stone mauls and antler wedges. It was only because the blocks were there that the religious architects of the Bronze Age were able to build Avebury and Stonehenge on such a magnificent scale. With their rough tools and tackle they were capable of shaping the blocks, of moving and raising them, in itself an astonishing feat, but they could hardly have detached them from solid rock. If it was true to say that the Victorian Age would not have been the same without the Carboniferous rocks, it is a much simpler and more obvious truth that without our sarsens we should be deprived of our two most heroic memories of the Bronze Age. Stonehenge is a fascinating example of the effects, for good or ill, which the mental influence of a people can have on the physical inheritance of their land. If its incorporation in a great work of art—book, poem or painting—can immensely heighten the quality and significance of some natural or artificial feature so also it can be debased by man. Cafes and chewing gum, car parks and conducted excursions, a sense of the hackneyed induced by post cards, calendars and cheap guide books has done more to damage Stonehenge than the plundering of some of its stones. It will never again be possible to see it as Constable did when he made his studies, a place of mystery against a background of storms and flying showers; it is doubtful if it could ever again have the deep impact on any man that it once had on Wordsworth; it seems no longer a setting fit for one of Hardy's gigantic, stereoscopic scenes. Men made it and men have destroyed it, the whole action taking place in the realm of the imagination. 132-33

*Chalk also carries flint, one of the hardest and least permeable materials in the world, formed from compacted sponges that once stood delicate but rigid in the brilliant underwater world of Cretaceous times.*

*The Romans made brick and tile here, but it was centuries till we again began to fire our native clays – there was no need, given flint and hard mud. Bricks were first established in eastern England in the C13th, elsewhere from Tudor times – the first building material used by man that he himself had made, cemented together with lime mortar made in the lime kilns which are still scattered through the countryside.*

## **8. Land and People**

RALLING IN TRANQUILLITY the slow possession of Britain by its people, I cannot resist the conclusion that the relationship reached its greatest intimacy, its most sensitive pitch, about two hundred years ago.

By the middle of the eighteenth century men had triumphed, the land was theirs, but had not yet been subjected and outraged. Wildness had been pushed back to the mountains, where now for the first time it could safely be admired. Communications were good enough to bind the country in a unity lacking since it was a Roman province, but were not yet so easy as to have destroyed locality and the natural freedom of the individual that remoteness freely gives. Rich men and poor men knew how to use the stuff of their countryside to raise comely buildings and to group them with instinctive grace. Town and country having grown up together to serve one another's needs now enjoyed a moment of balance.

Every town, every rural locality, had its special products and skills, its peculiarities of cultivation, its delicacies and local dishes. Round the coasts, too, whether their villages climbed steeply above rocky bays or straggled along low shores of sand and pebble, the fisherfolk were adapted to our island outline, each region with traditional gear and boats shaped partly by history and partly by use to take the particular sea creatures that time had left in its waters. Devonshire crabs and lobsters, Dover soles, Yarmouth herring. In every part of the country generations of hands had shaped the tools necessary for its way of life, while generations of tongues had shaped dialects apt for its expression. 143-44

*The Ice Age – humans ranged across the land with the shifting of the ice. During warm interludes that included southern Britain. Neanderthals made their homes in caves. Cheddar Man; an easy place to imagine the daily life of the Paleolithic Hunters. An acceleration came about as man learned to speak. Names could be given to the land, to places where hunting was successful, places of spiritual significance. By 8000 BC the ice had retreated, and the herds with it; fir trees replaced them, and new peoples arrived, Mesolithic food gatherers. Then followed a greener wave, of deciduous trees. In the meantime in the Middle East, people had begun to farm and raise stock. These practices came here in about 2500 BC, as Neolithic peoples arrived across the Channel. They spread over the uplands, the downs and the hills of the Jurassic belt. Adventurers sailing from Spain, Portugal, Brittany settled on our W coast. Mining began – conspicuously for flint at Grimes Graves in Suffolk. Then pottery, then megalithic tombs. Neolithic people left no war-like equipment behind.*

*Descendants of the old hunting stocks were fair; the Neolithic arrivals dark-haired and eyed like the Welsh. Then came Indo-European peoples, pastoralists coming via the south and east coasts. Communal burial was abandoned in favour of individual round barrows, and the open temples of Avebury and Stonehenge. Salisbury Plain was the centre of the Cretaceous world. By the end of the Bronze Age, Celtic-speaking invaders came from France and the Low Countries. They were not small or dark like the Welsh; these come from earlier Neolithic stocks. They introduced settled farming, using ploughs, and beginning to smelt iron. They spoke a language which became Gaelic, Irish, Welsh, Cornish. They marked our countryside with their forts; they were a warrior society. Gradually the heavier and more fertile soils were farmed. In the C4 BC the Greek Pythias visited, and called Britain something like Pritania.*

*Then the Romans, who stamped lines on the contours of the countryside – roads, towns, frontier systems. The Celtic tribal areas were kept as regions of local government:*

- *The Cantii; Durovernum Cantiacorum; Canterbury.*
- *The Regni; Noviomagus; Chichester.*
- *The Atrebat; Calleva Atrebatum; Silchester.*
- *The Catuvellauni; Verulamium; St. Alban's.*
- *The Trinovantes; Camulodunum; Colchester.*
- *The Icenii; Venta Icenorum; Caistor-next-Norwich.*
- *The Durotriges; Durnovaria; Dorchester (Dorset).*
- *The Dumnonii; Isca Dumnoniorum; Exeter.*
- *The Silures; Venta Silurum; Caerwent.*
- *The Coritani; Ratae Coritanorum; Leicester.*
- *The Cornovii; Viroconium Cornoviorum; Wroxeter.*
- *The Brigantes; Isurium Brigantum; Aldborough.*

*It was through the country villas that Roman ideas cut into Britain. Most were built by romanised Britons.*

*Then raids from Ireland, Scotland, N Europe developed into mass settlement. The Angles (Schleswig) chose the NE, the Saxons went up the Thames valley; the Jutes to Kent and the Isle of Wight. As they pushed westward, resistance increased. Saxon place names dominate today's Ordnance Survey maps. Settling at first along the rivers, they soon began an assault on the forests, which altered the whole character of the land – as big a change would not be seen again till the Industrial Revolution. Mercia emerged from the trees in the C8th. The Danes added place names and country habits to N England, and the Norwegians occupied Shetland and Orkney, moved into Cumbria and created towns. By the Domesday survey the shift of arable farming to the heavy soils was almost complete; the small Celtic fields vanished. Stone building began again with the Normans. But while they created a single state, each region had its own dialect. When the MA came to an end few large tracts of primeval England remained – substantial patches of woodland, and the fens, but most of the rest outside the mountain regions had been modelled by man. By Tudor times a country that had once been choked by trees was growing short of timber. Iron working and coal mining increased. By the end of the C18th Birmingham had devoured the Forest of Arden.*

Only the most prejudiced can deny that the eighteenth century, and especially the reign of Queen Anne, was for all classes one of the best times to have been alive in this country. It is idiocy to pretend that to live in a lovely countryside, to handle only comely things, and to know that only comely things will issue from your hands is of no importance when set beside the amount of cash in your purse. 198-99.

## **Chapter 9 : Land and Machines**

With the extinction of ancient arts and skills there went countless local rites, customs, legends and histories. All these, whether or no they had been adapted to the Christian myth, were survivals of a paganism that helped to unite country people with nature and their own ancestors. Stories and names for fields and lanes recalled men and women who had worked the land before them; legends still commemorated local deities who had lived in wood, water and stone; many customs recognized and assisted in the main crises of individual lives; rites helped to harmonize these individual rhythms with the greater rhythms of nature—they celebrated the turn of the sun, the resurrection of the corn, harvest, and the return of death.

Without these immemorial ties, personal and universal, relating men to their surroundings in time and space, the isolation of human consciousness by urban life was a most violent challenge. It gave opportunity for the heightening of consciousness and the sharpening of intellect, but human weakness and material circumstances made it impossible for any but the few gifted or fortunate to respond. The urban masses having lost all the traditions I have just named which together make up the inheritance which may be called culture, tended to become, as individuals, cultureless. The women were in better case, for all except the most down-trodden could rear children, clean, launder, sew and cook after a fashion, though all their work was dulled and robbed of distinction by the

standardization and poor quality of their materials. (It is one of the more bizarre results of industrialism that the rich will now pay great sums to obtain goods that were once taken for granted by quite humble people. Such things as real honey, fresh butter and eggs, hand needlework, tiles made of real stone, reed thatch.) 'For the men it was far worse. Usually they could do only one thing; and that without direct relation to their own lives; when they returned from the set hours of 'work' there was nothing for hand or imagination to do. So, when at last leisure was won for them, it proved to be a barren gift. 201

*By 1779 the gorge of the Severn which had been cut in the Ice Age by the overflowing waters of Lake Lapworth was spanned by the first iron bridge to be built in the world. The Industrial Revolution enabled this chip of the earth's surface, the small fund of human mind, will and energy that it supported, momentarily to dominate the whole surface of the planet and in so doing, like a gigantic, slow explosion, to disperse fragments of itself all over that surface. It seems possible that had there not been this association of coal and iron, growing population and intellectual ferment without the bounds of a temperate island, the industrialization that in two centuries has totally changed human life might never have assumed its present forms. 203-04.*

For the medieval peasant 8 weeks in the year were holy days, when a service in the parish church was followed by freedom for rest and celebration. No countryman could have celebrated them away from his own cottage, fields and animals, his neighbours and his church, for they were important threads in the fabric of life where all these things were woven together in a single design. 209.

If in some ways the State has far exceeded what is desirable in the imposition of conscious order on the chaos of Revolution, in others it has failed utterly in the necessary task of civilization. No intellect in command of power has stood back far enough to judge the upshot of this blind surge of energy, selecting what is hopeful for slow development, condemning what is abominable for gradual elimination. Too many of the conditions of life which it imposed without their being anyone's intention or wish, have been accepted as inevitable. This is because its basic value has been accepted, a materialism which has been exposed in all nakedness now that the energy and pioneering enthusiasms which inspired it have died away. Once men were concerned with the quality of life as a whole and with their relation to the universe; they could assume, for example, that the ritual and revelry of the Twelve Days of Christmas were of infinitely greater value than the small material gain to be won by working for those twelve days. Now a man who makes a comparable choice must be called an absentee and seen as a traitor. Production and more production of goods has become an end for which the land may be turned to a wilderness, while individual lives are sacrificed as readily as the victims of the Aztec gods.

There is a new fetish, the Standard of Living, a material measure hardly related to the enjoyment of life. Its worshippers believe that the 'dirt, stink and noise' so long ago recognized by Young, with the additional massive ugliness of the nineteenth century and the shoddiness of the twentieth are of no importance when set beside this artificial measure. So far have we in Britain been enslaved to this fetish that when we go to another country and see people with light in their faces and beauty all round them we dare not think them fortunate if at the same time we see they have not very much money. Yet here in this once most lovely island people will spend all that they have been able to save and their few most precious days of holiday in flying from the dirt, stink, noise and ugliness in which they must spend the other fifty weeks of the year. Surely it is time to recognize not a standard of living but a standard of values, in which beauty, comeliness and the possibility of solitude have a high place among human needs? It must be established that it is not sentimental to value a fine stretch of farming land more highly than the five thousand tons of iron ore which can be snatched from it, or to believe that life and amenity should not be sacrificed to production, to the rapacity of the machine. In America vast stretches of countryside have the lack of form and sanctity which shows it only to have been tilled since the age of exploitation; the American people, the most successful materialists in the history of the world, are now often to be found speaking with loathing of their own life and with nostalgic envy of the happiness of primitive peoples. 216-217

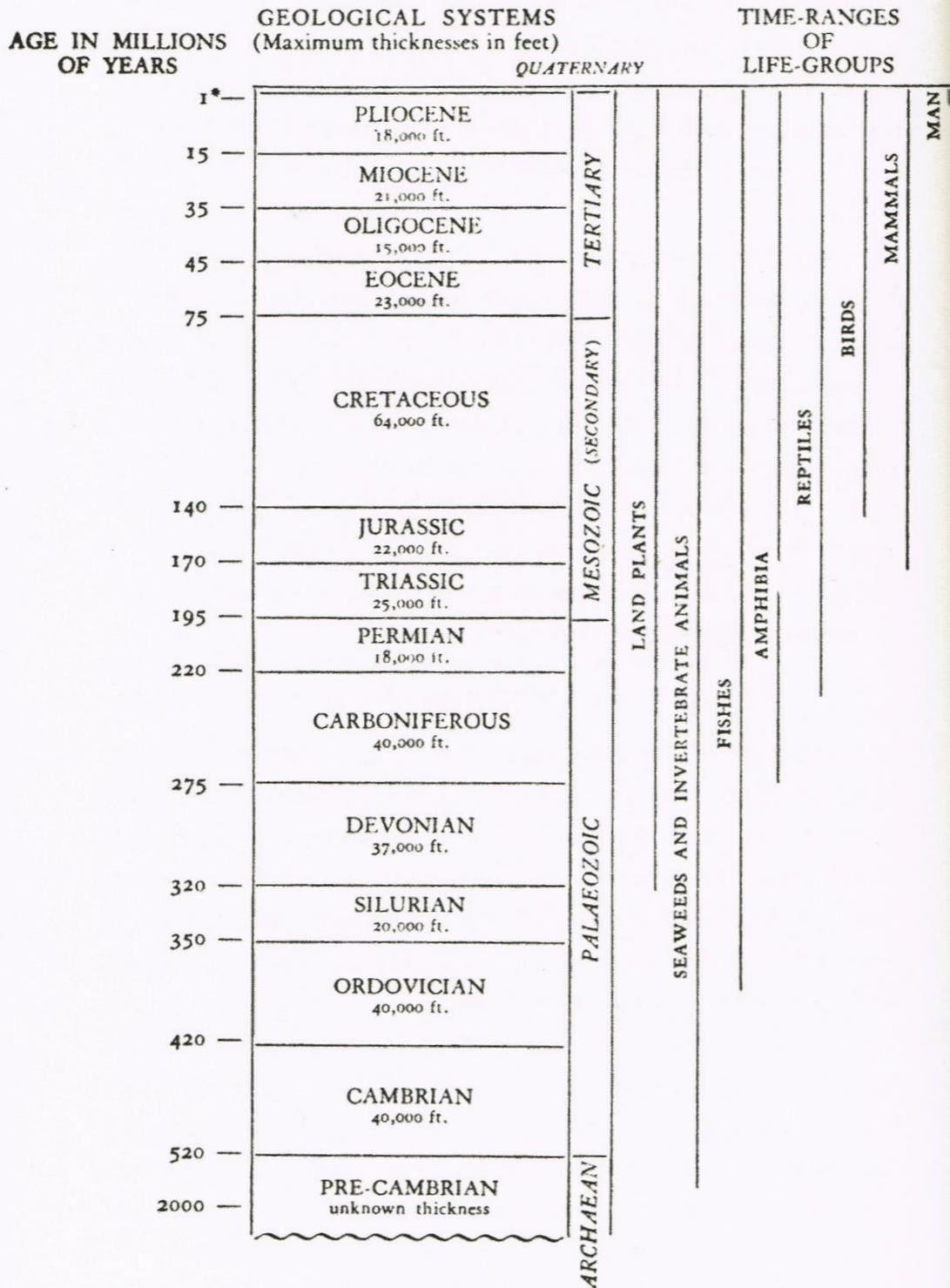
A man can enjoy good relations with other men only if he is a whole being, reasonably secure within the boundaries of his personality; so too, a land is only ready to join a community of lands if it has this fundamental self-sufficiency and confidence. 219

## **10. Prospect of Britain**

*Overview.*

APPENDIX

GEOLOGICAL TIME-SCALE



\* Quaternary (Pleistocene and Holocene) 4,000 feet.