

ALL THESE I LEARNT

BY ROBERT BYRON

If I have a son, he shall salute the lords and ladies who unfurl green hoods to the March rains, and shall know them afterwards by their scarlet fruit.

He shall know the celandine, and the frigid, sightless flowers of the woods, spurge and spurge laurel, dogs' mercury, wood- sorrel and queer four-leaved herb-paris fit to trim a bonnet with its purple dot.

He shall see the marshes gold with flags and kingcups and find shepherd's purse on a slag-heap.

He shall know the tree-flowers, scented lime-tassels, blood- pink larch-tufts, white strands of the Spanish chestnut and tattered oak- plumes.

He shall know orchids, mauve-winged bees and claret-coloured flies climbing up from mottled leaves.

He shall see June red and white with ragged robin and cow parsley and the two champions.

He shall tell a dandelion from sow thistle or goat's beard. He shall know the field flowers, lady's bedstraw and lady's slipper, purple mallow, blue chicory and the cranesbills - dusky, bloody, and blue as heaven.

In the cool summer wind he shall listen to the rattle of harebells against the whistle of a distant train, shall watch clover blush and scabious nod, pinch the ample veitches, and savour the virgin turf.

He shall know grasses, timothy and wag -wanton, and dust his finger- tips in Yorkshire fog.

By the river he shall know pink willow-herb and purple pikes of loosestrife, and the sweetshop smell of water- mint where the rat dives silently from its hole.

He shall know the velvet leaves and yellow spike of the old dowager, mullein, recognise the whole company of thistles, and greet the relatives of the nettle, wound-wort and hore- hound, yellow rattle, betony, bugle and archangel. In autumn, he shall know the hedge lanterns, hips and haws and bryony.

At Christmas he shall climb an old apple-tree for mistletoe, and know whom to kiss and how.

He shall know the butterflies that suck the brambles, common whites and marbled white, orange- tip, brimstone, and the carnivorous clouded yellows.

He shall watch fritillaries, pearl-bordered and silver-washed, flit like fireballs across the sunlit rides. He shall see that family of capitalists, peacock, painted

lady, red admiral and the tortoiseshells, uncurl their trunks to suck blood from bruised plums, while the purple emperor and white admiral glut themselves on the bowels of a rabbit.

He shall know the jagged comma, printed with a white c, the manx-tailed iridescent hair-streaks, and the skippers demure as charwomen on Monday morning.

He shall run to the glint of silver on a chalk-hill blue - glint of a breeze on water beneath an open sky - and shall follow the brown explorers, meadow brown, brown argus, speckled wood and ringlet.

He shall see death and revolution in the burnet moth, black and red, crawling from a house of yellow talc tied half-way up a tall grass.

He shall know more rational moths, who like the night, the gaudy tigers, cream-spot and scarlet, and the red and yellow underwings.

He shall hear the humming-bird hawk moth arrive like an air-raid on the garden at dusk, and know the other hawks, pink sleek-bodied elephant, poplar, lime, and death's head.

He shall count the pinions of the plume moths, and find the large emerald waiting in the rain-dewed grass.

All these I learnt when I was a child and each recalls a place or occasion that might otherwise be lost.

They were my own discoveries.

They taught me to look at the world with my own eyes and with attention.

They gave me a first content with the universe.

Town-dwellers lack this intimate content, but my son shall have it!