

30 Years On

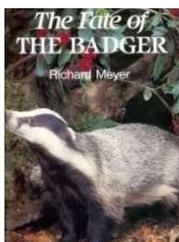
.....It's all the bloody same

The Fate of the Badger

by
Dr Richard Meyer



Photograph credit © Martin Kessel

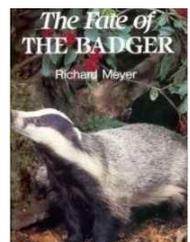


'The Fate of the Badger' by Richard Meyer

Publisher: Batsford Ltd; 1st edition (29 May 1986)

Still available from various outlets.

Look out for an updated re-print very soon.



30 years on.....

The Fate of the Badger

The Fate of the Badger was published by Batsford in 1986 – 30 (thirty) years ago. Since then nothing much has changed. That is the tragedy. I read my words again and, apart from some grammatical aberrations, I'd change hardly anything. That in itself, seems to me quite a remarkable statement because the creative process is always in a continual state of flux and revision.

When I say nothing's changed, I mean, quite frankly, it's all the bloody same – and I use the word not just as an expletive but in its most literal sense – for the blood of the innocents continues to be spilt. With my scientist's hat on, I ought to recoil from adjectives like 'innocence' and 'guilt' because we avoid these value judgements, don't we? But, in fact, even if the Badger was 'guilty' of spreading tuberculosis (bTB) to cattle (and all the other crimes laid at its door), it wouldn't be guilty, it would be a victim: thrust into that position by man's arrogance and blind stupidity.

I first became aware of this travesty of justice – the victimisation of the Badger - in the mid-1980s when a few of us attended a public meeting in Cornwall concerned about the killing of badgers by the Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF), and as a result formed BROCK (Badger Rights of Cornwall - Kernow) – the Cornish Badger Group. I must have been very naïve for I fondly imagined that vets would be allies in our quest for Truth. They were scientists, weren't they, of sorts? But we soon realised that

many relied on TB testing for their income, and that their paymasters were the Ministry and farmers. I have had some good vet friends - two collaborated on one of my books (*First Aid and Care of Wildlife*, David & Charles). [In the unlikely event you want to find it and can't, this and all my early books were written under the name Richard Mark Martin.] Another vet, also a MAFF pathologist, told me that vets who can't make it in private practice often joined the Ministry!

Our intention always in BROCK was to fight the official slaughter of a protected species by science, not emotion. Believing that *Knowledge is gained by Study, and Wisdom by Observation* I still think this was the right policy but we got more and more ensnared in the whole dirty political business. It was a steep learning curve and I quickly lost my naivety. We presented evidence to the Dunnet enquiry while 'Wildlife Link' (an arm of the World Wildlife Fund, as was) supported us. Through the efforts of Mark Carwardine, I obtained a contract to act in a Liaison capacity for them between conservation and farming interests.

I was, at this time, beginning my PhD on the return of the Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) to the Cornish cliffs and thus to England, we were also setting up our own field study operation on the edge of Bodmin Moor. The work and stress involved in all this effectively destroyed it and very nearly my marriage. With a young family I needed an income so my literary agent got me a contract to write an account of the Badger story - which is how *Fate* came about. I had no idea it would become such a tortuous saga - still running thirty years on.

Fate took me a year to write and was published on 27th May 1986. It was always intended to be 'a good read', I tried to balance the anecdotal with the science, the whimsy with the brutality, and thought I succeeded pretty

well but unfortunately the commissioning editor jumped ship half way through and the academic who took over lacked passion. I had arguments with the designers about the cover and the thing was not marketed well at all. Despite good reviews and the usual round of radio and TV, Batsford, I suspect, lost interest.

The publishers sold some 'remaindered' stock to a field sports business masquerading as a book dealer in North Wales. They had bought them to sell to their customers so that they could see what [quotes] “the opposition” was up to. To say I was angry is an understatement. My agent made them buy back all unsold copies. So if anyone has a copy with a stamp inside saying 'Tideline Books, Rhyl', it's one of those!

I'm pleased the book was never trashed, not even by our 'opposition', not by MAFF, not even by farmers – the few, that is, who bothered to read it. The only criticism I ever had was over the inclusion of characters from children's fiction, but this was intentional as I wanted to show why the badger is such a loved and even respected figure in our consciousness, and why it plays such a big part so many place-names around the countryside.

A writer in *The Economist* spoke of the 'Richard Scarry' rule which propounds that interests which feature heavily in children's books, governments prefer not to challenge. In such books of course farmers are always rosy-cheeked and cheerful with a cow and her calf, a pig and her piglets and chicks running around a sunny clean farmyard. There is no mention of slaughter, castration, battery production, farrowing crates, pesticides, muddy overcrowded byres or, of course, TB. But, for heaven's sake, isn't the badger also a firm children's favourite? That was my point.

The fledgling Federation of Badger Groups, under the chairmanship of John Taylor, asked me to represent them when invited to join MAFF's Consultative Panel. I did this for three years but it was quite a depressing experience. I had very few allies, even within the conservation lobby, only Colin Booty from the RSPCA was a strong.

In those days, our most vocal support came from some wonderful individuals: in particular a triumvirate of redoubtable ladies: Jane Ratcliffe, Eunice Overend and Ruth Murray – all magnificent in their different ways. My staunchest ally was the indefatigable Phil Drabble, who would phone me up with a stream of invective against MAFF – his arch-enemy. Apart from being a TV celebrity, he wrote for *The Field* magazine and so had a direct line of communication with the 'opposition'. Sadly now all these good folk have departed us. But we really do need such intelligent articulate champions who have the public ear. We are lucky to have such high profile campaigners as Brian May, Peter Egan, George Monbiot, Chris Packham, Simon King and a host of celebrities but what we could really use is a popular pro-badger 'countryman', someone perhaps like Johnny Kingdom – local to us in Devon, who might just get the ear of the rural deeply conservative community.

It is hard making science accessible to the non-scientific, and even harder getting through to the rural rustic. The better TV natural history programmes become, the harder it is even to get children involved. Television makes it all so easy – removing the necessity to think - it's done for you. When nature programmes are dressed up in such a gorgeous unrealistic way, narrated by a charming presenter, and conveying the sort of images we can never hope to see as mere bystanders, the reality outdoors becomes a hard act to 'sell'. If you can lounge on a sofa and watch badgers emerging from their sett, why sit in a

tree for hours, not moving or talking and being eaten by midges? Of course, nothing compares to the excitement of the reality but how to get people outdoors to try?

The saga of bTB has never been investigated scientifically on TV. We only ever get sound bites from the opposing camps, usually on a news channel. I have watched some wonderfully forensic arts programmes, and of course politics and the economy are gone into in mind-numbing detail but never the natural sciences. Human biology? yes... intimately and exhaustively. So, when knowledge is acquired from the TV, there is an onus on producers to do much better. Don't tell me that farming, animal care and wildlife are not interesting enough.

Mention of 'intelligence' before always makes me think of its difference to cleverness. People may be clever – very many are, or they may be intelligent – far fewer. If, as on a Venn Diagram, intelligence and cleverness were to overlap to a massive degree, we probably have a genius: a Leonardo, Einstein, Mozart, Beethoven, JS Bach, Shakespeare, Dickens or Rembrandt.

This isn't as irrelevant as you might think. The world is full of clever beings: animals are very clever - that's how they survive (*Survival of the Fittest*), but none is intelligent. One mark of intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing views at the same time and still function. Which is why, there is such a paucity of intelligence within our political masters and in the case of Liz Truss our mistresses. These people have risen to great heights because they are clever, but few if any are blessed with much intelligence. Tony Benn is the only recent one I can think of. This is our problem. And it is why we have to ask ourselves, why the bloody killing has gone on for so long.

Is not the answer 'intellectual heirlooms'? So much has been invested in a catastrophic fallacy borne of political expediency and the climbing of greasy poles, there is simply no way to save face. No hiding place. The fallacy was rooted in Economics and still is. 'They' can't, daren't, admit that original fatal error some 45 years ago. The financial consequences and repercussions could bring down a government... I really think it could. And yet, one superb definition of madness is to *keep repeating the mistakes of the past while hoping for a different result.*

Back in the days of Mrs. Thatcher, I had my Dr X – a mole in the ministry. He told me that the decision to continue culling badgers was taken at No. 10. The Ministers (at that time Peter Walker) were mere mouthpieces. Priority #1 within the Ministry was, and I quote, “to protect the Minister from any possible embarrassment”. As my father was also a chief civil servant, I can well believe it, from the stories he told me.

Inexorably caught up in that fallacy has always been the issue of who controls the countryside? We are talking about The Establishment here of course [95% of land owned by 5% of population] - most of the Cabinet, CLA & NFU. Defra, who took over from MAFF, and the NFU are physical next door neighbours in Smith Square, London. Call them what you like, I suspect they're always popping in and out for coffee and cocktails.

Mention of the NFU brings me to farmers, or more specifically, the Agricultural Industry. This is what most farmers claim their business is in, and we all know there's no sentiment and few ethics in business. Farmers are inordinately powerful, and yet many are supremely ignorant about life beyond the farm gate. Maybe they have to be, but as one farmer said, “Staring up the backside of a cow erases your intelligence.”

Sure, the human population doubled between 1960 & 2000, and farmers point to all those mouths to feed. Yet we have surpluses (at the time of writing, milk and lamb).

There seems to me to be two categories of farmers: the articulate (and possibly intelligent) – these are the ones we hear on Radio 4, selected by the BBC because they are articulate; and the others – the ones I seemed to have rubbed up against over most of the 25 places I've lived and worked at home and abroad. They're the ones I see at the local market and tried to work with for Wildlife Link. Mostly they are engaging clever folk but you have to search mighty hard to find one able to hold two opposing thoughts at the same time.

One I tried to talk to about bTB in my liaison role asked, "What has this got to do with you?" It was as though disease control, and the heritage of our wildlife and countryside was of no concern to anyone else. The well-educated articulate farmer wants, or says he wants, to do the right thing in terms of biodiversity, conservation, GM foods etc, but most, I fancy, see Badgers as weeds in just the same way as a gardener regards a Dandelion in the flower border: something to be removed and tossed aside without a second thought – in short, vermin. These farmers have little, if any, conception of ecology or webs of life. But when they get together they can be loud, macho and intimidating, even behind the collars and ties of the NFU. I've heard it said that, "One man won't string you up, and a mob won't buy you lunch."

You'll remember my mention of 'opposition' to our work. Well, if this is the game we have to play, let me recommend a good short book by Cynan Jones called *The Dig*: a harsh brutal read not for the squeamish but it tells what some of our opposition is up to, even now, today.

So, it's 30 years since my book was published. I find this incredibly hard to believe. What's even harder is that it's still relevant. That's not just me saying so, but also people new to it reading it today.

Those who 'Follow' me on Twitter will know I paint, and this is one reason why. Yes, I was inspired by my mentor and first employer Sir Peter Scott – the great wildfowl painter and conservationist - and the great art I've loved ever since being introduced to it by my elder brother. but it is also due to badgers or, rather, their killers. Like many now, the joy of badger watching is fraught with, '*For how long will I be able to do this?*'; it has been this way since 1971. I'm reminded of Milton's words in *Paradise Lost*, "*Farewell happy fields where joy forever dwells; hail horrors.*"

May I dedicate this article to all those who get out in the fields to protest and take direct action with the words of Robert Browning, "*For sudden the Worst turns the Best to the Brave.*"

I hope you'll allow me the conceit of ending with a couple of quotes from how I ended my book; rest assured they are not my words. Instead, a gamekeeper writing in 1985, said "*I would not dream of touching a badger no matter what he did; he was an English country gentleman before the Normans landed and he has a right to his place.*" A gamekeeper indeed! Finally, of course it was Kenneth Graham who gave these words to Badger in *Wind in the Willows*, "*We are an enduring lot, and we move out for a time, but we wait, and are patient, and back we come. And so it will ever be.*"

Amen to that!

Dr Richard Meyer

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