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Author's Final Draft (2007)

WOOLF, ROOKS, AND RURAL ENGLAND

Ian Blyth

[Diary, 3 September 1917] Perfect day; completely blue without cloud or wind, as if settled for ever. Watched dog herding sheep. Rooks beginning to fly over the trees, both morning & evening (*D* 1: 48).

The rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) is a member of the crow family, in fact it is often mistaken for a crow: the name scarecrow and the expression 'as the crow flies' both having their origins in the habits of rooks, rather than their more well-known cousins (Greenoak 192). A rook is about the same size as a carrion crow, but with glossy black plumage which, in the right conditions, reflects the sun in oily patches of blue, green, reddish-brown and violet-tinged purple. Rooks have a small tufted peak at the crown of the skull and loose feathers, resembling baggy shorts, round the tops of their legs. Their most distinguishing feature is a bare, grey-white, bone-coloured patch on the face, which generally extends about halfway along the beak. Rooks are gregarious creatures, gathering with other birds in large woodland roosts for the winter, and for much of the year can be found in rookeries—colonies of nests perched in the very topmost branches of a row of trees, traditionally elms, though oak and ash also have a long history of use (Jefferies 265). A typical rookery can be home to up to a hundred birds, sometimes considerably more.¹ The strangely harmonious cacophony that results is reflected in some of the collective nouns associated with rooks: a parliament, a building, a clamour, a congregation, a storytelling. The main call, or caw, of the rook is softer, less harsh than that of a crow: the rook's Scots dialect name, *craa*, is as good an approximation as any (Cocker and Mabey 413). Though not adverse to carrion, the rook's diet mainly consists of seeds and insects, with apples and acorns as seasonal supplements (Coombs 106). Like the lapwing and skylark, it is a bird of the rural landscape—cleared woodland, rich pasture, tilled earth—rooks are rarely, if at all, seen in great numbers in urban sprawls or remote wilderness locations (Cocker and Mabey ix, 414). The rook is a very British bird. It is perhaps the most British of all birds, for while they are found in much of Europe, as E. M. Nicholson observed in 1951: 'Except in a few parts of France I have never personally found rooks on the

Continent [. . .] in numbers which would be considered normal in England. Whether to be thronged with rooks is a blessing or a curse, it is certainly something which the British Isles enjoy or suffer beyond all experience elsewhere' (Nicholson 41–2).

Woolf's writing also throngs with rooks. Of the books published in her lifetime, only *Monday or Tuesday*, *A Room of One's Own*, the first *Common Reader* and *Roger Fry* are sans rooks. Now, it must be admitted that various other birds appear from time to time—sparrows, woodpigeons, swallows, starlings—but none occur with the consistent regularity of Woolf's rooks. For instance, rooks are the only species of bird present in every one of her novels. Sometimes they have minor roles, tucked away in the background. Sometimes they are right there in the foreground, invested with significance. Think of Ralph Denham's pet rook in *Night and Day*; or the section of *Jacob's Room* given over to a description of rooks settling down for the night (*JR* 73–4); or Joseph and Mary in *To the Lighthouse*; or Orlando's reaction upon hearing Shelmardine's name for the first time: "I knew it!" she said, for there was something romantic and chivalrous, passionate, melancholy, yet determined about him which went with the wild, dark-plumed name—a name which had, in her mind, the steel-blue gleam of rooks' wings, the hoarse laughter of their caws, the snake-like twisting descent of their feathers in a silver pool' (*O* 239).

Woolf's love of rooks can be traced to her childhood, to her earliest memories. In 'A Sketch of the Past' she recalls hearing both 'the waves breaking' and 'the caw of rooks falling from a great height' above Talland House (*MB* 66), and it is surely no coincidence that the rookish part of this memory resurfaces at the start of *To the Lighthouse*: the sound of 'rooks cawing' being one of the things 'so coloured and distinguished in [James Ramsay's] mind that he already had his private code, his secret language' (*TL* 7). It is there again, in *Three Guineas*, when Woolf—having called for a rejection of patriotism—describes a lingering 'drop of pure, if irrational' national feeling; a feeling, she explains, that takes the form of 'some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes' (*3G* 234). Woolf's diffuse sense of Englishness is in tune with the natural world. Her rooks appear to function as a form of metonymy, a shorthand for rural England. They find their way into the most unlikely of places, such as the thoughts of an elderly English couple who have just eaten lunch in a South American hotel:

There was then a very long pause, which threatened to be final, when, mercifully, a bird about the size of a magpie, but of metallic blue colour, appeared on the section of the terrace that could be seen from where they sat. Mrs Thornbury was led to enquire whether we should like it if all our rooks

were blue—‘What do *you* think, William?’ she asked, touching her husband on the knee.

‘If all our rooks were blue,’ he said,—he raised his glasses; he actually placed them on his nose,—‘they would not live long in Wiltshire’ (*VO* 277–8).

Again and again, when Woolf wishes to convey, in a single brushstroke, some sense of rural England, she turns to ‘the usual country gabble’ (*W* 224): ‘rooks flaunting up and down in the pink evening light’ (*MD* 29–30), ‘rooks dropping cool cries from the high blue’ (*TL* 19), ‘homing rooks’ (*O* 15), ‘rooks rising and falling, and catching the elm-trees in their net’ (*W* 119), ‘rooks, sitting huddled black on the tree-tops’ (*Y* 207), rooks who would ‘now and then let fall a queer little croak’ (*Y* 287). Yet these most scruffy and unglamorous of British birds are also present at moments of great national significance. For instance, Woolf’s diary entry for Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, begins thus: ‘Twentyfive minutes ago the guns went off, announcing peace. A siren hooted on the river. They are hooting still. A few people ran to look out of windows. The rooks wheeled round, & were for a moment, the symbolic look of creatures performing some ceremony, partly of thanksgiving, partly of valediction over the grave’ (*D* 1: 216).

G. K. Yeates, who in the 1930s was the first person to conduct a year-long survey of the rook’s life cycle, remarks that he ‘would not exchange a “seat” at a rookery for the best entertainment in London’; ‘all the time’, he explains, ‘there is life and action’ (Yeates 20). Gilbert White delighted in seeing them ‘sport and dive in a playful manner’, or hearing them make ‘a pleasing murmur, very engaging to the imagination, and not unlike the cry of a pack of hounds in hollow, echoing woods, [. . .] or the tumbling of the tide upon a pebbly shore’ (White 270). Richard Jefferies includes various anecdotes about personal encounters with rooks in *Wild Life in a Southern County* (1879)—the county in question being Mr Thornbury’s Wiltshire. Any excuse to introduce rooks is taken up. W. H. Hudson’s *Birds in London* (1898) is as much concerned with the birds that are absent from the city as with those that live there; ‘utter, irretrievable disaster has fallen on the inner London rookeries’, he writes, before giving a detailed account of tame rook found ‘injured in a park in Oxfordshire’ and adopted by an elderly lady who would visit London in the summer:

Early every morning he flew into her bedroom by the open window, and alighting on her bed would deposit a small offering on the pillow—a horse-chestnut bur, a little crooked stick, a bleached rabbit bone, a bit of rusty iron, which he had picked up and regarded as a suitable present. Whatever it was, it had to be accepted with demonstrations of gratitude and affection. If she

took no notice he would lift it up and replace it again, calling her attention to it with little subdued exclamations which sounded like words, and if she feigned sleep he would gently pull her hair or tap her cheek with his bill to awake her. Once the present was accepted he would nestle in under her arm and remain so, very contentedly, until she got up. [. . .] One day his mistress was walking in the Row, at an hour when it was full of fashionable people, and the rook, winging his way homewards from the gardens spied her, and circling down, alighted on her shoulders, to the amazement of all who witnessed the incident. “What an astonishing thing!” exclaimed some person in the crowd that gathered round her. “Oh, not at all,” answered the lady, caressing the bird with her hand, while he rubbed his beak against her cheek; “if you were as fond of the birds as I am, and treated them as well, they would be glad to come down on to your shoulders, too” (Hudson 52, 54–6).

It is quite possible this account served as the inspiration for Ralph Denham’s pet rook in *Night and Day*—the coincidence of imagery is certainly striking.² Like Hudson’s ‘injured’ Oxfordshire rook, Ralph’s was rescued after ‘[a] cat had bitten one of its legs’ (*ND* 400). Again like Hudson’s rook, we are told that ‘[t]he bird, encouraged by a scratch behind the ear, settled upon Denham’s shoulder’, and then stays there, for ‘some minutes, in the course of which neither he nor the rook took their eyes off the fire’ (*ND* 21). Ralph later tries to show Mary how he can get one of the sparrows in Lincoln’s Inn Fields ‘to sit on [his] arm’ (*ND* 164); and for Katharine, whose ‘attention’ is first drawn to Ralph’s rook by its making ‘[a] little dry chirp from the corner of the room’ (*ND* 399), it is the emphasis placed on this encounter that reveals to her mother the truth about her daughter’s feelings:

Mrs Hilbery elicited the facts that not only was the house of excruciating ugliness, which Ralph bore without complaint, but it was evident that everyone depended on him, and he had a room at the top of the house, with a wonderful view of London, and a rook.

‘A wretched old bird in a corner, with half its feathers out,’ she said, with a tenderness in her voice that seemed to commiserate the sufferings of humanity while resting assured in the capacity of Ralph Denham to alleviate them, so that Mrs Hilbery could not help exclaiming:

‘But, Katharine, you *are* in love!’ (*ND* 506–7).

When not appearing in person, Woolf’s rooks are a rich source of simile. An acquaintance, W. J. Turner, is described as being ‘like a tipsy rook’ (*L* 3: 330); the

arrival of ‘a great many old friends’, including Desmond MacCarthy and E. M. Forster, is referred to as ‘the homing of the rooks: we’re all settling on the trees’ (*L* 5: 160). Flush encounters an Inner London slum dwelling, a ‘Rookery’, where ‘human beings swarmed on top of each other as rooks swarm and blacken tree-tops’ (*F* 53).³ Eleanor Pargiter watches from the top of a London bus as the women shopping in the street below move about ‘like rooks swooping in a field, rising and falling’ (*Y* 91); the image returns to her when she goes to watch Morris in the courtroom (*Y* 104–5), whereas for her cousin Kitty, it is the audience at the opera house who ‘were like birds settling on a field’ (*Y* 173). And then, at the conclusion of the pageant in *Between the Acts*, when the Reverend Streatfield appears on the stage, it is ‘[a]s if a rook had hopped unseen to a prominent bald branch’ (*BA* 171).

As a letter to her sister on 18 May 1929 reveals, Woolf found the antics of rooks to be an endless source of fascination: ‘the gossip is coming, though I’m very cold, sitting in my lodge, looking at the rooks building—but that you dont want to hear about—Whats Rooks to me, or me to Rookeries you say, quoting Shakespeare, as your way is’ (*L* 5: 58).⁴ In her writing about rooks, Woolf can be seen struggling to bridge the gap between image and word. For instance, consider Mrs Ramsay, watching Joseph and Mary: ‘the air was shoved aside by their black wings and cut into exquisite scimitar shapes. The movement of the wings beating out, out, out—she could never describe it accurately enough to please herself—was one of the loveliest of all to her’ (*TL* 66–7). Or Woolf herself, writing in her diary at Monks House on 12 August 1928:

Even now, I have to watch the rooks beating up against the wind, which is high. & still I say to myself instinctively “Whats the phrase for that?” & try to make more & more vivid the roughness of the air current & the tremor of the rooks wing <deep breasting it> slicing—as if the air were full of ridges & ripples & roughness; they rise & sink, up & down, as if the exercise <pleased them> rubbed & braced them like swimmers in rough water. But what a little I can get down with my pen of what is so vivid to my eyes (*D* 3: 191).

Imperfect it may be, but such ‘imperfection’ is grounded in the limits of language rather than in the shortcomings of the writer. By anyone’s standard, this is a meticulously observed, beautifully described short passage of nature writing—one of many such passages scattered throughout Woolf’s work. As those who have been lucky enough to see such a performance for themselves can testify, ‘swimmers in rough water’ is an excellent attempt at what is in truth impossible: conveying in words the shapes in the sky made by rooks when flying—or rather ‘playing’—in high

winds.⁵ Indeed, I would argue that Woolf's description stands up to comparison with any other in the field. Here is Richard Jefferies's account of a similar scene:

At another time a flock will go up and wheel about in the strangest irregular manner. Every now and then one will extend his wings, holding them rigid, and dive downwards, in his headlong descent wavering to and fro like a sheet of paper falling edge first. He falls at a great pace, and looks as if he must be dashed to pieces against a tree or the earth; but he rights himself at the last moment, and glides away and up again with ease. Occasionally two or three rooks may be seen doing this at once, while the rest whirl about as if possessed; and those that are diving utter a gurgling sound like the usual cawk prolonged—"caw-wouk" (Jefferies 276–7).

Like all good nature writing, Woolf's emerges from a day by day, week by week, year by year familiarity with her subject. 'I think both Jefferies and Hudson succeed because they are very careful about what they observe', she advises her nephew Julian Bell on 16 October 1927, adding: 'I mean they do not make a catalogue of things, but chose this that and the other' (*L* 3: 432). Woolf would have had plenty of opportunity to follow her own advice. The letters and diary entries in which she describes watching rooks were all written in Sussex.⁶ It is also probable, with the notable exception of *Night and Day*, that the detailed descriptions of rooks in her essays and fiction were—at the very least—initially drafted in this rural locality.⁷ This is significant, because whether she was staring out of the window of her writing lodge, playing bowls on the lawn, or walking across the Downs, the sight and sound of rooks would have been an integral part of Woolf's day. As was indicated above, these are agricultural birds: birds whose presence in the rural landscape is as commonplace as that of buses, streetlamps and human beings in an urban vista. Their presence might not always be registered on a wholly conscious level, but they are missed when absent. It is little wonder, then, that rooks are to be found at the heart of Woolf's vision of rural England, a vision expressed in her diary entry for 27 March 1937 (written, of course, at Monks House in Rodmell):

Merely scribbling here, over a log fire, on a cold but bright Easter morning; sudden shafts of sun, a scatter of snow on the hills early; sudden storms, ink black, octopus pouring, coming up; & the rooks fidgetting & pecking in the elm trees. [. . .] Curiously a combination, this garden, with the Church, & the cross of the Church black against Asheham Hill. That is all the elements of the English brought together, accidentally (*D* v.72).⁸

Notes

1. Nicholson records that ‘in England [. . .] a colony of 500 nests is exceptional [. . .]. Yet in Scotland there are plenty of colonies running up to 1,000 nests or more, and the rookery in Crow Wood at Hatton Castle near Turiff in Aberdeenshire gave a total of 6,085 nests at the 1945 count. This is probably the largest breeding colony of any land bird in Great Britain’ (Nicholson 40–1).
2. One factor that might argue against this suggestion is that the copy of *Birds in London* found in the Woolfs’ library is the 1924 reprint (King and Miletic-Vejzovic 108), but then Woolf was certainly reading Hudson prior to this—she reviewed his autobiography, *Far Away and Long Ago*, for the *TLS* on 26 September 1918 (see *E* 2: 298–303)—and the presence of this 1924 reprint does not in itself rule out the possibility that she read the 1898 first edition at some point prior to writing *Night and Day*.
3. In this instance, Woolf is also drawing on the work of Thomas Beames, whose *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present and Prospective* (1850) she recommends to those seeking ‘an account of London Rookeries’ (*F* 107).
4. The allusion is to *Hamlet*, 2.2.553: ‘What’s Hecuba to him, or he to her’. I am grateful to a member of the audience in Birmingham for pointing this out.
5. On this question of ‘play’, Coombs notes: ‘Rooks sometimes make tumbling dives [. . .] most commonly in windy weather. [. . .] This seems to be “play” as several species may take part, mixed flocks of rooks and jackdaws, sometimes with ravens and carrion crows, and even herring gulls fly to and fro along the hillside, rising with the updraught and diving and turning down again’ (Coombs 91).
6. See *L* 2: 64, *L* 4: 58, *L* 6: 316, *D* 1: 48, *D* 1: 216, *D* 3: 190–1, *D* 4: 41, *D* 5: 72.
7. See, for example, *JR* 73–4, *TL* 66–8, *O* 236–7, *DM* 9; see also the fleeting reference to ‘the rooks of Gray’s Inn passing overhead’ (*JR* 121). The last of the Inner London rookeries, the Gray’s Inn rookery dated back to at least the sixteenth century, and Woolf would have seen these rooks on many occasions during her early years in the city; however, their presence in *Jacob’s Room* is an ‘historical’ reference: the rookery was abandoned in 1915 (see Nicholson 46).
8. This essay was prepared for publication during an AHRC-funded research fellowship in the School of English, St Andrews. My thanks to Fiona Benson, Annie Kelly, Rich King, Jim Stewart, Emma Sutton, Beth Wright and everyone

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