

## 'Far Forest' by Francis Brett Young

An appreciation by Eunice Pritchard

Francis Brett Young (1884-1954) appears to be the only writer to choose Wyre Forest as the setting for a novel, which he did with the publication of 'Far Forest' in 1936. Brett Young was a very successful author in his time. He wrote 30 novels, 4 collections of short stories, 3 volumes of poetry, 3 non fiction books and three plays. Three novels, 'My Brother Jonathan', 'A Man About The House' and 'Portrait of Clare', were made into films. All his novels were set in environments he had himself experienced. His favourite locations were the Black Country, Worcestershire and the Welsh Marches.

He was born in Halesowen and trained as a doctor at Birmingham University. Working first as a locum in Hockley and Bloxwich, he then joined a practice in Brixham. In the war he served as an army doctor in East Africa. After the war he soon decided to become a full time writer and spent time travelling and living abroad. But his love of Worcestershire remained; it was, he said, the most beautiful place in the world. As a medical student he and a group of like-minded medical students had formed a club known as the Octette. Their interests were in music and outdoor pursuits and we see an early interest in the Wyre Forest and the area beyond, when a walking holiday is recorded in September 1907, starting from the station in Stourbridge and going, via the Enville sheepwalks and the ferry at Arley, through the forest and on to Cleobury and eventually the Welsh Marches and so covering the area which was eventually to feature in 'Far Forest'.

Whilst Brett Young said that the people and places in his stories were part of his imagination, his fictional writings have a strong autobiographical nature and reveal how sensitive he was to the atmosphere of places and the people he met and knew. A feature of his writing is to disguise people and places by the use of imaginary names - in 'Far Forest' Wyre Forest is called 'Werewood' and the 'Gladden Brook' he refers to, is Dowles Brook. Nineveh, the family home in the novel, must be inspired by one of the mills on Dowles Brook.

'Far Forest' is a fine example of a story reflecting Brett Young's knowledge of the Black Country and the forest of Wyre. It tells the story of two cousins, Jenny and David, living with their parents in the Black Country, but whose grandfather lives in the family home in the forest. They have disturbed lives, which take them back and forth

between Black Country, the forest, the Welsh Marches and Wales before they find happiness in the old family home by the Gladden Brook. The reader can become so immersed in the romantic story of this family that he may overlook the fact that he is at the same time being introduced to Brett Young's love and understanding of Wyre Forest; his knowledge of its seasons and its climate changes and how these affect the natural life of the woodlands and the people living in the forest. We have to take stock of what Brett Young experienced in his walks with his friends all those years ago and wonder at the changes that have taken place since 1907 and what, indeed, is still the same a hundred years later.

The author introduces the reader to the forest:-  
*"The first quality that strikes a stranger in Werewood is its monotony; the next, its mortal silence. He may twist for mile on mile over those leaf-felted paths - which are no more than tracks which the light feet of foxes and deer and badgers have trodden in darkness - without feeling that his immediate surroundings have changed, without hearing a sound that is louder than his own ghost-like tread. Before him, behind, and on every side the serried millions of stunted oak-trees encompass him. Their utter sameness destroys all sense of direction. The very air he breathes has a uniform deadness that is not merely imaginary; for it is saturated with the exhalations of shed leaves turning to mould and so closely imprisoned and pressed down (as it were) by the roofing of tangled boughs that even when rain-storms lash the forest and gales howl above him its lower layers remain unvexed and still. No bird-song enlivens that silence but the harsh screech of a jay or rare shouts of the woodpecker. All the feathered life of the forest is concentrated in those fringes where the trees stand up like a cliff above the pastures fed by its brooks.*

*"For this dumbness of itself, folk accustomed to cheerful sound find Werewood unfriendly. But for those who come to know it by heart and so cease to be strangers, the mute forest, in its seasonal changes, affords an enthralling variety of sensual impressions. To their quickened senses no path smells the same as its neighbour or feels the same underfoot. Every tree - birch, alder or oak or yew - has an individual aura, a proper savour, and even (when leaves are stirring) a voice of its own...Werewood is a world in itself."*



# Wyre Forest Study Group

How many of us, visiting the forest for the first time, have also noticed the monotony and then, later, the variety?

Brett Young captures all the seasonal changes. When Jenny returned to the forest in midwinter she saw withered leaves still clinging to the oak trees in sheltered places. Elsewhere all the deciduous trees "had shed their finery, frost had bleached the grass and the yews stood erect and lonely on the banks like plumes on a hearse". The cobwebs are seen as "frosted miracles, every tree a white spectre, every twig sheathed in brittle ice and the ground felt like a frozen sponge". Finally "when snow fell silently, it smothered all the surface of Werewood save where circles of the charcoal burners' fires still held heat". In the snow "the pointed hoof prints of the deer and other shy creatures – foxes, otters, badgers and stoats – could be seen". When the snow came the inhabitants were confined in forced isolation. Winter was truly on the forest.

But then spring brought new life and on the verge of the brooks the primroses "powdered the hedgerows with sulphur and thrust their pink stalks through the drift of dead leaves to mingle their perfume with that of the white violets". The story tells of a short ten day idyll when Spring

*"embellished the forest with her gentler hues: lime green cowslip stalks and cuckoo flowers making a mist in the meadows; wind flowers milky in the woods. In one night the ruddy shoots of the Pershore plums were pranked with clusters of blow lying light as late snowflakes. In paddock and orchard the watered grass sprang so lush that neither rabbits nibbling all night nor lambs grazing all day could keep it in check. The deep springs were now filled, so that all the brooks ran gaily; and all the birds in Werewood, it seemed – save the screaming magpies and jays and the hungry sparrow-hawks which built their untidy nests in the thick of the forest - now congregated for food in the watered valleys".*

When spring moved into summer the wood-ants "sizzled feverishly as though the heat made them simmer", while "in the charcoal clearings adders awoke to sun their slim coils" and "in the depths of the wood fallow deer lost their wonted timidity...hinds and fawns wandered freely by day from pasture to pasture, and old stags (bucks?), oppressed by the heat of their blood and the torture of wood-flies, lay sunk in the cool slides and stickles of the Gladden Brook, their antlers upthrust like bare branches." Later in the story

David returned to the forest. Having left it in the "ecstasy of spring", he now came back when "summer was heavy upon it with no birds singing and the trees bowed beneath their burden of leaf" – using here the forest as an instrument of his moods and feelings.

Eventually the "languor of summery growth" came to an end in the forest.

*"Its air had a crisp and lively sting in it that made the skin tingle and quickened the blood. The very sky from which the gathering whorls of swifts and swallows had vanished, hung empty, cloudless, crystalline, inviting expansion. At night the stars throbbed and sparkled as if there were frost in it, and, at morning, though no frost came, the valley meadows glistened with silk that the floating gossamer-spiders had spun to snare their minute winged quarry which, before, the swallows had hunted, and which now, dragged downward nightly in cold vapours settling from the sky, lay sodden and caught in fabrics whose dewy whiteness simulated rime.*

*"It was only when the sun rising unimpeded had drunk this dew that the autumnal opulence of Werewood revealed itself - not, as yet, in the transient splendour of stricken leaves, but in the fruits which ripened on tree and hedgerow; in the straggling orchard whose branches sagged under the burden of lemony cider apples; in the hedges, where hips warmed from orange to bright vermilion and haws burned dusky red; in thickets of tarnished bramble and elder displaying their trusses and clusters of lustrous purple and jet; in bines of bryony and clambering nightshade set with scarlet drops and globules; in high, flame-coloured plumes of rowan, that the missel-thrush haunted, in the glutinous fruit of the black and solitary yew-trees which, pillaged and crushed, smeared the ground at their barren bases with goutts of blood."*

For Brett Young the Gladden Brook, alongside which Nineveh, the family home stands, is the main feature of the forest. Moving through the seasons its sights and sounds provide much drama. It is first presented as "a shallow water which slides almost noiselessly over the shelves of sandstone" and later Jenny remembers "the lapsing murmur and tinkle of the brook" and the water, which "sang and chuckled and flashed and dimpled or flowed smooth in slides to mirror the kingfisher's streak." When characters are far away from Nineveh they imagine they can hear the comforting sounds of the brook. But Brett Young is also aware of its wilder moods

as this description of a flash flood in which the grandfather drowns:-

*"...for the dawn, lightning quickly now, showed the whole narrow valley as one wide sheet of leaden water swimming, swirling away, with no bounds save the falling edge of the forest on either side and no landmark save, here and there, a straggling thorn bush lifted above the drowned hedgerows. Somewhere under this treacherous expanse, unseen and silent, the Gladden Brook flowed with its tortuous alternations of pool and stickle. There was nothing here, where the alders had been cut, to tell where it ran."*

The brook has a life of its own – residents today say that they can tell by listening to the sound of the brook before they rise what has been happening overnight and flooding happens periodically, as shown by the marks carved on the door of Knowles Mill, going back to 1798. Chris Williams, who lived at Knowles Mill, remembers, as a 14 year old in 1924, the water coming up to the front step of the house.

This was Francis Brett Young's forest, back in 1907. What of our forest today? That which is unchanged, we can judge for ourselves when we read his work, but what is different? Forestry practices have changed the nature of the woodland. There has been large scale planting of conifers and the introduction of heavy machinery has required roads to be built throughout the forest, opening it up to the public and threatening the habitats of some of Brett Young's shy creatures. Science has come to the forest, informing both the practice of the forester and that of the plant and animal lovers who devote their leisure time to its study. The voices of those who would preserve our environment have become many and cannot be ignored and the forest is the better for it. It is appropriate to note that Francis Brett Young was among the first of these, when he wrote to 'The Times' in May 1950 (see below) protesting at the plans to mine coal in the forest. Admirers of the forest today, who wish to discover the wonders of Wyre long ago can do no better than read Brett Young's 'Far Forest'.

## REFERENCES

Francis Brett Young: Far Forest, published by Heinemann 1936  
 Michael Hall: Francis Brett Young, published by Seren 1997  
 Journals of the Francis Brett Young Society: nos 40, 41 1998/99

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## To the Editor of the TIMES

Wed. 10th May 1950

SIR,

Worcestershire is a small County and for this reason the richness and variety of beauties it boasts are particularly valuable. Nearly 20 years ago the Worcestershire Council for the Preservation of Rural England was engaged in a partially successful attempt to protect the peerless skyline of the Malvern Hills from destruction by quarrying. Today, an even more grievous threat of spoliation hangs over the most secluded and as one had supposed, the most secure portion of the County – the green hills of its north western marches between Teme and Severn, embracing the recesses of the Forest of Wyre, so dear to A.E.Housman; nothing less than the exploitation of this area by the Directorate of Open-cast Coal Production on the Ministry of Fuel and Power.

Now we all know that coal has been mined for centuries at many points in the area of the Forest of Wyre. The Bayton Colliery which has now been closed down, has produced in its time, as much as two hundred tons a day. But we also know that the coal won in this district is of extremely poor quality: a source of continued complaint by domestic consumers, and desperately unsuited for industrial use. These points have already been emphasised by the Worcestershire County Council and by a 3 strong local committee recently set up under its auspices. But I think those of us who love these precious uplands best have a right to ask two questions: what quantity of open-cast coal the Ministry expects to win from this hideous spoliation and whether the fuel won is in any way likely to justify the expense of an unwieldy experiment?

Yours faithfully,  
 Francis Brett Young  
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Francis Brett Young