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Landlocked

Bullying and intimidation dominate the British countryside, as landowners and shooters assert their power.

I've often thought, watching the felling of ancient trees, the slaughter of wildlife and the stripping of topsoil¹, "I love this land more than the owner does". While there are plenty of careful landowners, there are others who seem to despise their own property. Those of us who love the land struggle against its owners to protect it from ruin.

For centuries, challenging the way the land is used has been treated as a trespass: we are told it is none of our business. Yet this is the very fabric of our nation. Conflicts over its treatment are portrayed in the billionaire press as a war between town and country. But most of the nature lovers I know live in the countryside. This isn't about rural versus urban – it's about power. As Guy Shrubsole's crucial new book *Who Owns England?*² shows, major rural and urban landowners are often the same people.

There is one real difference between town and country. In the countryside, people are often afraid to speak out. You can see why in the recent treatment of the television presenter Chris Packham. After an organisation he helped to found – *Wild Justice*³ – successfully challenged the unlawful killing of several bird species, two dead crows were left hanging from his gate⁴, whose lock had been super-glued.

Harassment of this kind is familiar to rural people who challenge shooting or foxhunting interests. Two long reports, one in *the Independent*⁵, the other in the online magazine *The Overtake*⁶, detail the bullying and intimidation associated with foxhunts, that run riot in the north of England while the police look the other way. There's an almost Sicilian culture of fear: people are frightened into silence or forced to move house. Locals complain of mob rule as hounds and horses rampage through their gardens and trash their businesses. Hunt monitors, documenting blatant lawbreaking, are beaten up with impunity, while their vehicles are scratched and smashed.

Everyone knows it's happening. No one seems able or willing to stop it.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/25/treating-soil-like-dirt-fatal-mistake-human-life>

² <https://www.harpercollins.co.uk/9780008321673/who-owns-england-how-we-lost-our-green-and-pleasant-land-and-how-to-take-it-back/>

³ <https://wildjustice.org.uk/projects/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/25/dead-crows-left-at-chris-packhams-home-in-row-over-killing-pest-birds>

⁵ https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/fox-hunting-uk-britain-mobs-driving-communities-apart-a7948516.html

⁶ <https://theovertake.com/-beta/sabs/>

For some of Britain's most powerful people, hunting and shooting are primordial rights, and any challenge to them is treated as illegitimate. They assert ownership not only of the land, but also of the social relationships surrounding it. Landowners, farmers and gamekeepers, though they comprise a small minority of the rural population, claim to speak for everyone, and dismiss those who challenge them as interfering urbanites. I call their social power, with a nod to Antonio Gramsci⁷, agricultural hegemony.

Essential to the control of the countryside, as Shrubsole documents, is secrecy. Landowners have successfully resisted a comprehensive public catalogue of their holdings: the *Land Registry*⁸ is incomplete and protected from full public scrutiny by a paywall. Vast tracts of land are held by trusts and shell companies based in offshore tax havens⁹. But they continue to receive our money in the form of farm subsidies, paid by the hectare. The more you own, the more you are given.

These payments are not accompanied by corresponding rights. Despite the continued efforts of access campaigners, we still have a right to roam across only 10% of the country. If, as Theresa May has claimed, we seem like the *citizens of nowhere*¹⁰, part of the reason is that we are treated as intruders in our own nation.

A visit to almost any stately home reveals something hidden by centuries of justifying myth: the British aristocracy is a death cult. In most of the grand houses on public display, there are scenes or implements of killing wherever you look. Paintings of battles and paintings of hunts, both featuring men in uniform charging on horseback, hang among weapons of war and animal heads. Britain's traditional ruling classes are as obsessed with death as any street gang in Tegucigalpa. Killing, after all, is how they got there.

The next rank – the county set – could be seen as the aristocracy's enforcers. These are people who tend to visit their rural houses only at weekends, but whose representatives insist in newspaper columns that they are the authentic voice of the countryside. Their fashions – waxed jackets, tweed hats, red trousers, waistcoats with shotgun patches, *Range Rovers*, springer spaniels and labrador retrievers – proclaim an association with field sports: the right to hunt has been a class signifier since the *Norman Conquest*.

For some members of these classes, much of the animal kingdom is divided into two categories: game and vermin. Game means animals you pay to kill. Vermin means animals you pay other people to kill. Sometimes it sounds as if the second category includes rambblers, ecologists and anyone whose ancestors gained the right to vote in the past 150 years.

Landowners claim to be the custodians of the countryside. Some of them merit this description. There are plenty who are trying to improve their practices, and even to rewild their land¹¹, to allow nature to return. But there are others who claim to have "made the landscape", but flatly refuse to take responsibility for the loss of wildlife, ecosystems, soil and water quality their practices have caused. They viciously attack anyone who seeks to hold them to account.

⁷ <https://www.thoughtco.com/cultural-hegemony-3026121>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/land-registry>

⁹ www.private-eye.co.uk/registry

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-37563510/conservative-conference-theresa-may-s-speech-in-full>

¹¹ <https://knepp.co.uk/home>

Chris Packham's crime consisted of mounting, with other people, a legal challenge¹² to the general licence permitting the unregulated killing of 16 bird species, including some that are innocuous and one (the lesser black backed gull) that's listed as a conservation priority¹³. The government's agency, *Natural England*, at first resisted the challenge, then suddenly caved in. It announced¹⁴ an almost immediate suspension of the licence for five days, while it was redrafted to bring it into line with the law. No one expected or wanted¹⁵ the existing licence to be scrapped immediately. But Packham and the other members of *Wild Justice* were condemned for the disruption.

After it became clear that Packham had been wrongly blamed, *the Telegraph* published an article¹⁶ by an old Etonian landowner¹⁷ called Jamie Blackett, who lamented not the hanging of the dead crows but the fact that it was reported in the media, apparently "to distract attention"; claimed that the legal challenge reveals the "full insanity of Packham's agenda" and reiterated calls for his sacking from the BBC. The article seems to me likely to encourage further harassment¹⁸. But Chris Packham, like pheasants and foxes, is now treated as fair game. His hounding is another bloodsport.

I hope that the courage and humour¹⁹ with which he has responded to attempts to intimidate him will encourage other people to challenge the power of those who claim to speak for the countryside.

There is a long tradition, for many years airbrushed from popular history, of rural radicalism, exemplified by people like Gerard Winstanley²⁰ and William Cobbett²¹. It is time to revive it.

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¹² <https://wildjustice.org.uk/projects/>

¹³ jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2886

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/general-licences-for-bird-control-major-changes-to-licensing-requirements>

¹⁵ <https://markavery.info/2019/04/28/what-wild-justice-says-about-the-general-licence-issue/>

¹⁶ <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-daily-telegraph/20190427/282059098413644>

¹⁷ <https://www.quillerpublishing.com/authors/b/jamie-blackett.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/30/chris-packham-reveals-death-threats-made-in-bird-shooting-row>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/ChrisGPackham/status/1122547980639322112>

²⁰ <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745331836/gerrard-winstanley/>

²¹ www.williamcobbett.org.uk/biography/