Edinburgh International Book Festival: Jim Crumley and Adam Thorpe

‘Symbols of hope in an uncivilised world’

So says **Jim Crumley,** and for the moment he’s not talking about sea eagles or wolves. No, the acclaimed nature writer is talking about us – the audience for the Edinburgh International Book Festival session he is sharing with writer and poet **Adam Thorpe.** Nature writing, Jim says, is ‘the jazz of book festivals – you never know if anyone will come’.

Well come they have, and for anyone who’s heard Jim speak before, it’s not surprising. To write about nature properly, you need to spend time alone with it; Jim does lots of that, but he’s also able to write and talk about it in ways that bring it alive for us less hardy souls. Similarly, a book about a Neolithic mound in Wiltshire might not be the first thing you’d think of as exciting, but after you’ve heard Adam read from ***On Silbury Hill*** you’ll be as keen as he is to find out more. Journalist **Susan Maitland,** who’s our excellent chair for this hour, asks Adam to start.

The point of Silbury Hill, says Adam, is that it has no point. In an enthralling reading from his book, he tells us that even though he’s known Silbury since he first went to board at **Marlborough** at the age of 13, ‘she’s not very forthcoming’. There are plenty of things this four thousand year old mystery is not; it’s neither a slag heap nor a burial ground (according to **Jim Leary,** archaeologist for **English Heritage,** there’s nothing special inside it), though recent work has established that it’s definitely a contemporary of **Avebury** (one mile away) and **Stonehenge** (15-20 miles to the

north). Indeed, Adam's interest in it was piqued by **Merlin's Mound,** a 'baby Silbury' in Marlborough's grounds – and it turns out that this one too can be dated to 2,300-2,400BC. They were, says Adam, all 'part of the same statement', but what that statement was, and what sacred beliefs this great landscape answered to, no-one knows.


Image (c) Mike Pitts

The how of Silbury is as much a question as the why. It's about thirty metres high, covers five acres of land and must have been built with few tools, although it may be associated with the arrival of copper from Spain. In a time when the average life expectancy was around 35 years, the building of it crossed three generations. Archaeologists infer from this that the society that made it must have been complex. Jim Leary thinks that the construction process was as important as the finished object, that every bit of earth meant something to those people, the building being part of 'a continuous storytelling ritual'. Although it's now grassed over, Silbury was probably as white as the Taj Mahal when it was first built; was that whiteness part of its essence?

In Adam's book, facts about Silbury and her sisters are  interspersed with snippets of life at Marlborough – boiled beef, initiation ceremonies, the smell of drains – and of Adam's own visits to Silbury (which he's climbed but you mustn't) and also to **West Kennet Longbarrow** near Avebury, one of the largest Neolithic chambered tombs in Britain, where, on All Hallows Eve, he encounters Pagans and feels far from welcome. And Adam does have his own theory about why Silbury was built – but you'll have to buy his book to find out what it is.

Theories are part and parcel of Jim Crumley's writing, but above all he believes in getting out into nature. He quotes

his own favourite nature writer, **Aldo Leopold,** who says that most books don't mention the wind because they are 'written behind a stove',

'I hope you get the smell of the wind in my books'

Nature's Architect is Jim's thirtieth book – and he only started writing them when he was 40, 'I should be about 98 by now' (he's actually thirty years younger, which means a prodigious production rate of more than a book per year). His last, ***The Eagle's Way,*** was about the re-introduction of sea eagles on the west and east coasts; this one looks at the resurgence of the beaver, a mammal that hasn't lived in the UK for 400 years. Nature writers, he says, need their own patch; they need to become intimate with it. Gradually the patterns and rhythms underpinning that landscape will make themselves known, and anything new will 'make the antennae twitch'. *The Eagle's Way's* inspiration was the arrival of sea eagles in Jim's Tayside 'territory'; when he came across a beaver dam, the first he had ever found, near **Callendar,** another spark was fired.

Beavers are especially important to Jim because they bring together his interests in nature and architecture (they've yet to play jazz…). The architect **Frank Gehry,** one of Jim's heroes, referred to his work as '*liquid architecture*', a term that fits beavers perfectly,

'Beavers build landscapes from scratch and from water that flows and timber that grows in the wrong place. All life is improvised liquid architecture, to which end water must be taught not to flow and timber not to grow, at least not there…' (p2)

Image (c) Yorkshire Rose

Image (c) Rob Munro

Susan points out that there's a lot of suspicion and negativity about the reintroduction of beavers; do we need to listen to it? Jim does not; he thinks it's unfounded, and stems from our lack of cultural memory of the species. Beavers are vital to the enhancement of our wetlands, which are some of Scotland's most endangered areas. The official reintroduction trial is already being assessed, just five years after it started; this is ridiculous, he says, when beaver colonies take 45-50 years to re-establish. The same thing happened with **sea eagles**, who were brought in from Norway as chicks and hadn't been taught by adults how to behave. It all takes time.

The **Scottish Natural Heritage** beaver trial was based in Argyll – so how, asks Susan, did Jim come across them in Perthshire? SNH calls this lot 'illegal beavers'; the colony started with a few who are said to have escaped from a private collection

and entered the **River Earn**. Was the ‘escape’ really an accident?

‘As with a political party, there’s always a provisional wing…’

He’s much more interested in this colony because it is essentially free-range. No-one knew these beavers were there at first, so they decided where they wanted to go, which was all over the Tay catchment area – **Angus, Perthshire,** even the **Trossachs.** The SNH trial cost £2 million; every beaver move was logged; with the ‘free-range’ beavers nature was effectively saying ‘Don’t do it your way, do it mine’. Jim’s friend, the New Hampshire naturalist and artist **David M Carroll,** has said

‘Let wildlife manage wildlife’

and it’s a view that Jim very much shares. Scotland has plenty of unpopulated land, but we’re not great at managing it; if we could just apply Carroll’s advice on a national scale, ‘conservation would not be a problem’ – wolves and beavers could manage the land.

We are, he feels, far too keen to try to control nature when it’s inconvenient to us; grouse moors and deer forests are ‘grotesque Victorian interferences with nature’. Native species are being allowed to die out whilst at the same time there is talk of reintroducing the lynx,

‘Common sense is absent from both the conservation and the land management side of the argument’

Asked by an audience member what they think about the – allegedly essential – cull of **badgers,** both Jim and Adam are unequivocal. Bovine TB, says Jim, is a disease of cattle not badgers, and rather than face up to our basic misuse of land, we look for something to blame,

Image: One More Shot Rog

‘It’s a preposterous idea that a badger cull will cure TB’

The one good thing to come from the ‘PR disaster’ of the cull, Jim thinks, is that the Scottish government may now think it’s easier to leave beavers alone. He sees a desperate need for enlightened environment ministers; he’s not optimistic about that in Westminster, but thinks the situation is slightly better in Edinburgh. For Adam, badgers are far less of a problem that pumping cows full of hormones and antibiotics,

‘Badgers have a wisdom about them that we have lost’

‘Rewilding’ is a fashionable word, and one that Jim doesn’t like, though he approves of the sentiment behind it. He prefers to speak of ‘giving back to nature what we have taken away’ and his abiding hope is that we will now see the reintroduction of wolves in Scotland. He believes that if sea eagles, beavers and wolves are returned to the wild (and the wildcat population restored),

‘The face of wild Scotland will transform’.

Adam says that Silbury Hill, which has in the past been damaged by successive excavations (a shaft dug in 1776 actually collapsed in heavy rains in 2002, although the site has now been repaired – and the collapse did give archaeologists the opportunity to carry out a few more investigations), has now been ‘healed’ and is respected as ‘sacred in a secular way’. For Jim, nature herself will not be healed until we stop imposing our – often selfish – ideas on it and instead listen to what it tells us,

‘Animals are the teachers. We need to look and learn.’

On ***Silbury Hill*** by **Adam Thorpe** is published by **Little Toller Books; *Nature’s Architect*** by **Jim Crumley** is published by

Saraband.