

Graduation 2007 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduated Richard Mabey
Orator: Professor Jules Pretty OBE

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon RICHARD MABEY

We are living in an age of disconnection from nature. Despite great economic progress, and access to the most wonderful technologies, we are spending less time in nature these days. This is especially true of today's children, who are outdoors about half the amount of time compared with 25 years ago. One consequence is an inevitable decline in the knowledge of nature, a decreased likelihood to perceive of its wonder and magic, and ultimately a diminished likelihood to care.

Richard Mabey is one of our most successful and eminent nature writers and observers, and has done more than anyone in recent decades to maintain and re-establish these valuable connections to nature. His eye has tended to focus on those nearby natures of direct importance to local people rather than the more distant wild-lands. He has written about individual species, such as the nightingale; about pioneering naturalists like Gilbert White; about the wildwoods, the forests, the roadsides; about wild foods; and lately about nature's curative properties.

Richard Mabey was born in 1941 and raised in the Chilterns, which were his home until the late 1990s, when he moved to the open skies of the Norfolk-Suffolk borders. He went to Berkhamstead School, and then to St Catherine's College, Oxford. He was senior editor at Penguin for 7 years before becoming a freelance writer. The first of his 39 books was published in 1969, and he has written a regular column for the BBC Wildlife magazine since 1988. Many of you will know that well I am sure. He has written for newspapers, and produced and directed two series for BBC television. He has variously been a member of the Nature Conservancy Council, President of the London Wildlife Trust, Vice-President of the Open Spaces Society, and Director of Common Ground. In 1986 he won the Whitbread Biography of the Year for his assured study of Gilbert White. But he has, like all great writers and thinkers, been able to reshape whole ways of thinking with his precise observations and enchanting stories.

The first of these was his 1972 book, *Food For Free*. It is not too far in the distant past that most rural families and a good many urban ones too, relied on wild foods for an important part of their diets. For many people, this hidden harvest was one not just an adjunct to meals, but actually a mainstay. These included greens, berries, roots, fungi, flowers (especially for wine and aperitifs), and came from plants and animals alike. But it takes ecological literacy to locate these, and then to know what to do with them and Richard Mabey's long-standing *Food For Free* has done this for decades. It also makes a subtle point: many of these wild plants are in the commons. They are available to us all. As he says, "officially wild fruits and mushrooms are the property not of the owner of the land, but of the picker". Test the law, he also says, and "re-establish gleaning as a common right".

It is, of course, slightly unfair to pick on just three of Richard Mabey's many splendid books, but I now move forward to the 1990s and the simply remarkable *Flora Britannica*. This magnificent book of nearly 500 pages was both a wonderful concept and beautifully executed. The idea was this: people in different parts of Britain have knowledge, and stories and folklore about what makes different places and their people distinctive. Richard Mabey set out to collect information on more than 1000 species to create this unique flora of the people. The *Flora Britannica* project was

launched in the winter of 1991-92, and over the following four years was widely publicised on television and in the press. Many thousands of responses came in – on postcards and tapes, in pictures, and as part of reminiscences and stories. And of course this was before the age of e-mails so rather more difficult to do than you can imagine today.

What then became clear after publication in 1996 is that this format really worked. It sold wonderfully well, and was quickly copied by other authors to produce books about animals and trees of cultural importance. It was then followed in 2004 by Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey's equally splendid *Birds Britannica*. This did for birds what the first one did for plants – told people's own stories in combination with ecological and scientific knowledge, and presented it all in an accessible format. Now we hear there will be a *Bugs Britannica* as well.

At the end of the 1990s, though, Richard Mabey fell into a severe depression. Many people suffer mental illness of one sort or another, but few are able to write honestly and movingly about it. We know about this trauma and subsequent recovery through his insightful and subtle book, *Nature Cure*. During his depression, the natural world lost its meaning, its source of joy and inspiration, and cared for by friends, he moved to the fenlands with their "silent flickering shadows". He started to write, and *Nature Cure* tells not only his personal story of recovery, but also of the value of what Harvard biologist E O Wilson calls biophilia – our compulsive yearning to be close to living things. Nature is good for health. Without it, we suffer. Some of our research here at the University of Essex on green exercise and green care has quantified some of those mental and physical health benefits of exposure to nature.

What Richard Mabey has done, though, is to indicate just how damaging is disconnection from nature. And it is these disconnections that are subtle and worrying. It is not just that we do not go there so much; it is that we come to believe that we know about it, and therefore we control it. Nature reserves now seem to need interpretation boards, television programmes focus on bizarre nature (to catch our attention), nature becomes reduced to an abstract and dispassionate 'biodiversity', and we forget the magic and mystery. Nature should always be something mysterious. A single snowdrop in spring, the distant bark of a fox, the ghostly stirring of a barn owl at dusk. It is, in many ways, not entirely knowable. And we need to be reminded about this.

Richard Mabey has long been an inspirational writer, evoking landscapes of cultural and ecological significance. Through his work, he encourages us to listen to nature, otherwise we will, as he says "suffer a terrible trauma of separation, a deep loneliness at the loss of our closest relations". Fellow nature writer, Simon Barnes, urges us to go out with high hopes and low expectations. We will rarely see nature red in tooth and claw, as it always seems to appear, of course, on television programmes. We will more often need to see nearby nature in its simplicity, and this is something we should wonder at, appreciate, enjoy, and then tell other people about the stories that persist. "Language", says Richard Mabey, "joins us to the natural world".

Chancellor, I present to you RICHARD MABEY.