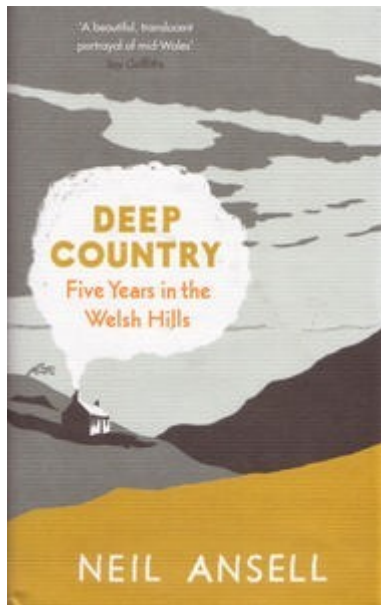


BOOK REVIEW

Ansell, Neil. *Deep Country: Five Years in the Welsh Hills*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011.



Neil Ansell spent five years living between the back of beyond and the middle of nowhere, on his own, with no electricity, gas or water and effectively only the wildlife around him for company.

His dilapidated cottage, rented for £100 per year, was so exposed to the elements that it appeared to rain uphill, and so remote that one could walk for twenty miles west without seeing a single other dwelling.

Ansell relates how, as the years passed, he learned to be at ease with himself "but it was not by knowing myself better – it was by forgetting I was there. I had become part of the landscape, a stone."

He goes on: "Imagine being given the opportunity to take time out of your life, for five whole years. Free of social obligations, free of work commitments. Think how well you would get to know yourself, all that time to consider your past and the choices you had made, to focus on your personal development, to know yourself through and through, to work out your goals in life, your true ambitions. None of this happened, not to me. Perhaps for someone else it might have been different. Any insight I have gained has been the result of later reflection. Solitude did not breed introspection, quite the reverse. My days were spent outside, immersed in nature, watching. I saw as much as I did because of two things: the first, quite simply, was time, the long hours spent out in the field; the second was alertness, a state of heightened attentiveness. My attention was constantly focused away from myself and on to the natural world around me. And my nights were spent sitting in front of the log fire, aimlessly turning a log from time to time and staring at the flickering flames. I would not be thinking of the day just gone; the day was done. And I would not be planning tomorrow; tomorrow would take care of itself. The silence outside was reflected by a growing silence within. Any interior monologue quietened to a whisper, then faded away entirely."

The author has a particular interest in birds – he earned a small income from recording their behaviour – and his detailed observations and imaginative turns of phrase make for beautiful reading. At one point he writes: "A brood of redstarts from my box had left the nest; as I walked around the garden they sprang unexpectedly from the ground at my feet and whirred away, until their clockwork apparently ran down and they slumped suddenly back to earth."

Deep Country is an astonishing, immersive book about turning your back on modern life, about focusing on your surroundings, and about what it means – in these fast-moving times – to stay still.