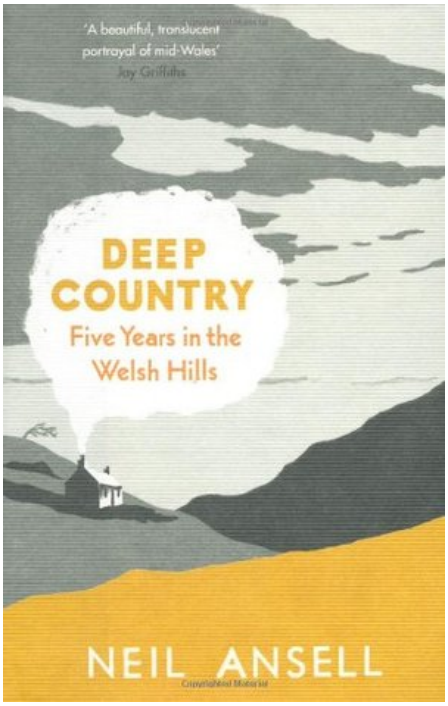

Deep Country: Five Years in the Welsh Hills

Neil Ansell

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Deep Country: Five Years in the Welsh Hills Neil Ansell
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, is so exposed to the elements that it appears to rain uphill, and so remote that you can walk for twenty miles west without seeing a single other dwelling. As the years pass he feels himself dissolving into, and becoming, just another part of the landscape.

Deep Country: Five Years in the Welsh Hills Details

Date	:	Published 2011 by Hamish Hamilton
ISBN	:	9780241145005
Author	:	Neil Ansell
Format	:	Hardcover 206 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Environment, Nature, Autobiography, Memoir, Travel

From Reader Review Deep Country: Five Years in the Welsh Hills for online ebook

Bettie? says

3 episodes

blurb - *Neil Ansell is in search of solitude. He takes up home in a dilapidated cottage in a remote part of the Welsh countryside, on his own, with no electricity, gas or water. He has only wildlife around him for company as he makes the cottage habitable.*

Written by Neil Ansell and abridged by Willa King, Deep Country is read by Matthew Gravelle.
Reader/Matthew Gravelle, Producer/Emma Bodger for BBC Cymru

There is a whole sub-genre of books where the solitary life is sought and then wham-bam-thankee-mam epiphany/new thoughts/poetry-where-art-thou that just has to be foisted on to the book market.

Do yourself a favour, ::don't:write::. Keep the lovelies all to yourself, it is far better that way.

Mile says

I have to say this book turned out not to be what I had expected and in a way, not what I had hoped. I had been keen to find out more about Ansell's experience of escaping from the conventional world and spending five years living alone in a isolated stone cottage miles from anywhere. I guess like many people I have sometimes wished I could get away from it all and wondered what it might be like.
What led Ansell to make this choice and what did significant people in his family think when he decided to do it? Did it make him re-evaluate the norms that most of us live by? Did he miss anything? Women, sport, reading, music?
I'm afraid there is little about this side of his experience, instead the book sometimes feels like an extended account of bird watching. There are many pages about the different birds that Ansell observed from various locations around the cottage. And while these are often interesting and informative in their own right, I really wanted to know something else which he just didn't seem to write about - his experience. What about the days when he woke up cold and tired and just didn't feel like having to chop wood again, what did he say to himself then, could he feel his mood changing as the day wore on?
The most interesting chapter is the last one, where Ansell describes his final months in the cottage and the role that illness played in making him think again about staying there. But even here I would have liked a little more reflection and disclosure perhaps. Why did it make him feel so bad when a phone was installed for him, what was the line of thinking which led him to conclude that he would have failed if he had used the phone for anything other than emergencies.
A further chapter exploring how Ansell found the return to normal life would have been interesting. Was it hard for him after five years away on his own?
So all in all a book that raised more questions for me than answers...

Kate says

Almost didn't make it through this one - the man loves birds and seems to remember everyone he sees.....But so glad to have pushed on through the ornithological detail. I would have liked more on what life was like in the cottage and the other people in the area - but I think that was the point, the birds and beasties were more important to Ansell than people. He has some interesting insights into the nature of 'self' drawn from his 5 years of solitude and a period of serious illness > 'we tend to think of the self as something fixed, the bottom line, but it seemed now to be the most fragile of constructs'. He observes the changing nature of his journal, as the years progressed it became less and less about him, and then just less and less: 'I came to the hills to find myself, and ended up losing myself instead. And that was immeasurably better'.

I also loved the (goth) crows nest made of sheep bones in lieu of sticks, the bats, the kingfishers and the hares. So amazing and inspiring, all these things busy LIVING even if, as Ansell observes 'the prevailing forces at work.....are hunger and fear'.

Sorry to the other users of Leeds City library - I seem to have had this one since May. I took it to Canada.....

David Edmonds says

I heard Neil Ansell discuss his book at Dartington's Ways with Words. What struck me about him was his absolute genuineness. This was not an experience undertaken to write a book, marred by forced comedy or earnestness or excessive enthusiasm. Nor is it a project as such. I liked his observations on birds and animals, compressed from five years experience. It is reminiscent of J A Baker's The Peregrine.

Huw Rhys says

This book had been recommended to me by someone who knows that I enjoy disappearing into remote parts of the countryside to contemplate life from time to time. I'd bought the book a while back, and saved it up to read at the right time...

How disappointing can a book be?

Other than a few pages in the Epilogue, we get very little reflection from the author on how his retreat from the world changed or even affected him in any way.

We are told very little about the world outside the few hundred yards or so he wanders from his remote cottage - apparently in the Welsh hillsides, but it really could have been anywhere.

What we're left with is no more than a glorified bird spotting journal. Although only just over 200 pages long, reading this book felt like a lifetime of hearing about one swallow after another circling a wooded copse. Often I'd have to re-read lumps to make sure I really had read the same thing twice (thrice, or actually four times by the time I'd re-read it!).

It's a poorly thought out book, and a very poorly executed book.

We learn nothing of the author's back story - why he felt the need to isoalte himself from the world like this - nor what this isolation either meant to him at the time, or how it changed him.

It's just a very turgid twitcher's diary, I'm afraid - and a very disappointed reader. This book could have been so much more, which is why the disappointment was so acute.

Christine Dolan says

A man lives in an isolated cottage in Wales for 5 years, with no phone and no transport. Then he writes about it. His constant companions are the birds and other wild creatures that live in his locality. This book reads like an episode of Springwatch. I was totally absorbed by it, and I miss reading it now. So if you love nature, and want a tranquil read, then this is the book for you.

Available at my house for all Springwatch fans to borrow. I am now off to find a cottage in deepest Wales where I can watch the birds to my heart's content. Sigh!

Victoria (Eve's Alexandria) says

This was a beautiful, languid read, telling the story of Neil Ansell's five years living in isolation in the Welsh hills. It loosely cycles through the seasons, full of minutely observed anecdotes about birds, wildlife trivia and a smattering of local history. There are some glorious moments, like the time he opened his door to hare on his doorstep. The final chapter is quite brilliant as he reflects back on his experiences. But there was slightly too much bird life for me and not enough of the other stuff. I would have liked a little more of the reflection that dominates the end of the book and a little less of the sparrow hawk antics.

Marri says

I took the baggage of expectations into this book, which is why I didn't rate it higher; it was a fine book, and I suspect others could enjoy it more than me. I have no criticism of it save for disappointment that my expectations weren't met, and that's all.

I had hoped that this would give me insight into the nuts and bolts of homesteading, but aside from some tantalizing brushes with daily life and practical knowledge (cutting wood, making mushroom ketchup), this is more of a bird diary than anything else. Birds are ABUNDANT in this book, and the author is quite knowledgeable about them, so certain passages and insights are a delight -- but cumulatively, it gets boring. Birdwatching is one of those things better experienced than read about, especially at length.

Other wildlife sightings perk the narrative a bit here and there, and Ansell is at his best when delving into the local history of Penlan and the lives of those who call it home (like the girl he met who was about to be married and had never really left the 50km or so of her birthplace), but these encounters are pretty rare. Sitting alone in a cabin, it turns out, doesn't make for the most engaging account.

But it was a relaxing read, and I did feel that short of up and leaving the city myself, putting my brain out on a Welsh hill was restorative after all. And Ansell's final refection on what the five years of isolation gave him were worthwhile. He went to the hills to find himself, but says instead his ego dissolved, and that he became

a pair of eyes, a vessel. An interesting psychological shift I would have liked to hear more about, at the expense of some of the description of long-eared bats.

Rebecca says

One of the most memorable nature/travel books I've ever read; a modern-day *Walden*. Ansell lived in primitive conditions in a cottage in the Welsh hills for five years. Solitude and surviving on life's basics suited him, and putting in unlimited time and attention led to absolutely magical encounters with wildlife, especially corvids and birds of prey. His memoir is packed with beautiful lines as well as philosophical reflections on the nature of the self and the difference between isolation and loneliness. "I came to the hills to find myself, and ended up losing myself instead. And that was immeasurably better."

Sarah Goodwin says

This is a book about birds.

I was not expecting this.

It hardly matters that Mr Ansell is living in a cottage in the middle of nowhere, he may as well be describing long walks he has taken from his terraced council house in any rural village or small town. I was led to believe that this would be a book akin to 'The Call of the Wild' - with practical details and a cohesive narrative of the experience the author had. In that I think the blurb and even the title of the book have set it up to fail, as they make much of the isolation and the simple life - which is barely described in this book.

I would not have bought this book if I thought it was just going to be about wildlife, and not a narrative over the five years, in which stories of wildlife happen to feature. There is very little sense of time passing here, it's just one anecdote after another, and no real sense of WHEN these occurred, aside from which season the writer was in at the time.

If you like birds, then this is essentially a book length prose poem about birds, their nests, their personalities and their hunting patterns. Sometimes the talk turns to badgers or sheep or butterflies, but only as a garnish to the main course - birds.

Only not literally, because Mr Ansell is a vegetarian.

Amy says

Peace and quiet. Time to hear yourself think. No need for a clock. All things that sound pretty wonderful to me, and that are found in this lovely book. Neil Ansell spent five years in PenlanCottage in Wales, an extremely isolated location where you won't hear your neighbors argue or their car alarm going off. Instead, bird song and silence....bliss.

Let me say immediately that this book is not for everyone. There's no car chases, not really any suspense (unless you count the search for where mother Mandarin duck laid her eggs), and no wild characters (except for the hares that speed through occasionally). But, for those of us who crave a little calm, this book is relaxing and appealing.

Ansell is a journalist, and he craves isolation as well. He's also precise in describing, for the most part, the types of birds that frequent the area and their breeding habits, even conducting a survey of species and totals.

A few of the birds I didn't recognize by their UK names, so I had to Google them for pictures. All of his descriptions of their stealth and means of throwing off predators is fascinating. Lots of facts are sprinkled in, such as how bats can live thirty years and return to their roosts the entire time.

Yet the book isn't just about what he sees outside the decrepit cottage, but what he sees inside himself. After a health scare, he observes:

"What remains if you peel away all those things that help you think you know who you are? If one by one you strip away your cultural choices, the validation you get from the company of your peer group, the tools you use for communication? Then what is left behind? If you had asked me that three or four years earlier, when I was just arriving at Penlan, I imagine that I would have guessed: your true self. But I soon found that in fact I rapidly became less and less self-aware; my attention was elsewhere, on the outside. And now that circumstances had forced me to look inward once again, it was to discover that there was perhaps no fixed self to find. So what was there instead? Now, more than ever, I had the sense that my life was no so very different from that of the birds fluttering on my bird-feeder, as though a boundary between us had been broken" (188).

I think this would be an amazing audiobook (Martin Shaw or Alan Rickman on the voice, please!) because the subject matter is soothing. When I went through a recent health scare, often it was suggested I use visualization to relax, especially during a few procedures that were without anesthetic. The nurses all said, "picture a long, sandy beach at sunset....". Nope, in the future I'll picture a rainy cottage with a wild-eyed rabbit perched on the back step and through the fog, a tree covered with yellow birds.

Jeroen says

Books, and the medium of writing that they reach us through, are by their very definition products of culture. In the beginning, there was not the word, no matter how much we writers would like to believe that.

Furthermore, writing is almost invariably the result of thought. Even the stream-of-consciousness techniques of the dadaists and surrealists reach us through the authors' minds, the only difference being that they don't give themselves time to examine the thoughts. We could say then that thought is in a sense the matter of which books are made up, the way stuff is ultimately made up of atoms. And it is then precisely because thought is so inextricably bound up in our books, that a single book spawns so many elaborations and further writings and, ultimately, new books. Thought begets thought, and it is certainly not coincidental that we often speak of creative offspring.

But when it comes to offspring, of course, nature is still the dominant domain, our primary association. Nevertheless, whereas thought begets thought, and our cultural storehouses grow exponentially, the atoms that make up the world around us do not expand in such a way. Nature is cyclical, and in a sense always doubles back upon itself. One generation does not build upon the next.

These distinctions are important to keep in mind when approaching any instance of so-called nature writing. In Britain especially, the genre has recently made a glorious return, spearheaded by the books of Robert Macfarlane. It seems that the Brits more than ever long to get away from their cities, even if these are hardly as grimy as they once used to be. Since most people do not have the time to actually get away properly, the second-hand experience of books will have to do.

Neil Ansell's *Deep Country*, subtitled *Five years in the Welsh hills*, fits neatly in the new craze, and in fact, the book's premise makes it an easy sell, touting its author as a “latter-day Thoreau”. Those of you who have actually read *Walden* might have been surprised, as I was, by how many compromises Thoreau ultimately made in his quixotic attempt to live in a little hut in the woods. It's hard to read about his painstaking preparations for a harsh winter without realising that for so many people (especially in Thoreau's days), this was just life, not an experiment. For Thoreau was not the ascetic he is often made out to be, the kind of person that Christopher McCandless tried to emulate. In fact, he resided very close to town, and went in frequently to stock up on goods. While his theories were of self-sufficiency, the practice simply wasn't.

But what distinguishes Ansell rather sharply from being just another Thoreau, or McCandless, is that he is not an escapee from society seeking higher presence of mind in absence of [whatever], nor is he just another misanthropic curmudgeon, berating the world from his safe cabin outside of it. Ansell describes the process of moving to the Mid-Wales cottage on the roof of the Cambrian Mountains as a gradual one, as something he kind of slipped into. He had, he says, a busy social life, many friends, but the cottage came into his life at the right time, when he was already busy burning bridges; it was only a small step to burn the last few.

Nevertheless, in a book like this you expect long harangues on the state of society, and on the beauty of getting away from it all. You expect that the guy who was busy burning bridges did so because he had good reason to think over his life, and that his spell in the wilderness would finally give him the time to do this. This didn't happen to Ansell, and that is telling. In what is probably my favorite passage, he explains what the isolation did to him, and how. I have to quote this at length:

> This was the pattern of my days, a simple life led by natural rhythms rather than the requirements and expectations of others. 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 would 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 spend 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 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. I have never practised meditation, but there is a goal in Buddhist practice of achieving a condition of no-mind, a state of being free of thought, and I seemed to have found my way there by accident. I certainly learned to be at ease with myself in the years I spent at Penlan, but it was not by knowing myself better – it was by forgetting I was there. I had become a part of the landscape, a stone.

Of course, there is indubitably an ascetic quality to Ansell's quest, as this passage aptly shows, and of course, there is that sense of freedom, that sense of going back to the roots, learning to live all over again, in harmony with nature. But there is no ideological hammering. As he himself says, if he arrived at any state of mind at all, it was by accident. There is something pleasantly *que sera sera* about him, and – perhaps following on from this – a great sense of peace which is felt in the writing. “I couldn't feel lonely,” he states at one point. “Loneliness is the product of an isolation that has not been freely chosen.” He makes it all sound so simple.

The title Deep Country refers to an idea that Ansell returns to quite a few times, namely that no matter how small the habitat you live in, you cannot exhaust it. When he leaves after five years, he is adamant that it is not because he is bored, or because he has seen everything there is to seen. He argues in favor of exploring a small place in depth, as opposed to larger stretches in breadth. Superficially, or quality over quantity, and of course above all a return to the olden days, when people's scope in the world was tied up to how much ground they could cover in one day.

Having set the scene, in both the physical – the direct surroundings of the Penlan cottage – and mental – what the hell is he doing there – sense, Ansell turns for the rest of the book simply to what he already hints at in the above passage: simple observation. In this also looms the comparison with *Walden*. Thoreau, too, set up the theological framework in the first few chapters and then wallowed in long-winded romantic reveries on the pond, the trees, and the wildlife. Interestingly, all I remember from those parts of the book are the moments when Thoreau's bubble is punctured by civilisation: his wonderful passages about the trains passing his cottage. In *Deep Country*, similarly, I am reading all these descriptions of the birds he saw and their closeness and familiarity, but nothing really sticks except the overall feel of him out there, going about his day. Which is enough for me.

But is it enough for a book? That I remember the train sections from *Walden* is of course precisely because they are intrusions from culture. The great value of interacting with nature, I think, is that it does not stir one's thoughts. We hardly ever sit and think about nature; no, we marvel at it, or we are left in awe, or are disgusted. All involuntary responses. The sense of freedom that we feel when returning to nature stems from the fact that nature can get by on its own; it does not need us. It is still much more perfect a machine than any that we will ever make: no lag, no reboots, beautiful graphics, and the bugs it does have do not need to be fixed.

The problem is that these consolations of nature cannot be truly got second-hand. Not like this. Writing about it, just so, as it is, is impossible: the very fact of words turns the spectacle, that most flawless of machines, into culture, and destroys everything good about it. There is a vacuousness in this here text, my eyes drift over it, and while it is not without its charms, it is ultimately, utterly without point.

Utterly without point. Come to think of it, Ansell would probably like that conclusion, actually. At the end of

the book, he browses through the notebooks he erratically kept throughout that half decade, and observes that he has “disappeared entirely from [his] own narrative. I came to the hills to find myself, and ended up losing myself instead. And that was immeasurably better.” When he leaves the hut, he leaves it with exactly the same small bag of belongings that he arrived with. In a sense this indeed nicely renders the whole exercise as *utterly without point*, but of course it turns out that that is precisely the point.

Richard Fieldhouse says

It's got birds in it. 5 years without East Enders. Brilliant.

Lou says

Rather alot about birds, and not enough about how Ansell actually survived, but was an ok read nevertheless.

J. Boo says

Precis by the author here: https://www.theguardian.com/environme...

"What I found was not what you might expect. You might think that such protracted solitude would lead to introspection, to self-examination, to a growing self-awareness. But not for me. What happened to me was that I began to forget myself [...]

I could have stayed forever; becoming, no doubt, steadily more reclusive and eccentric. I had the measure of this life now, it had long since ceased to feel like any kind of a challenge; this was just me living the life I had chosen. What led me away in the end was a visceral, almost bodily, craving to have children, in a way that is rather expected of women but less so of men. And though it seemed unlikely, I was to meet the woman who would become the mother of my children while I was still living at the cottage."
