

**BBC Radio 4 ‘Outsiders’  
The Crickets of Troopers Hill  
by Michael Malay**

[First broadcast on 26th March 2021, listen to the programme here](#)



**Troopers Hill, July 2020 - Rob Acton-Campbell**

Last spring, after the world changed – after the streets fell silent and the horizons seemed to shrink – I began going to a place called Troopers Hill. It’s a nature reserve in east Bristol, half a mile from where I live. It’s a beautiful place – in the mornings, the old sandstone quarry glows with light, warming the eye that sees it, and as the day advances, the light tips onto the rest of the hill, bringing out the green of the broom and the mauve of the heather. But it can also be a desolate place. Three weeks ago, I stood here late at night, while the unhinged energies of a storm boomed through the woods, crashed up the hill, and flailed the grass and scrub around me. I shouted into the storm, to see if my voice would carry, but the sounds were snatched up into the night. Standing there, it felt as though the hill were separating itself from England, as though I were on an island far out at sea.

At the top of the hill is an ancient chimney – a grey stump of weathered stone – and however you approach the hill, it’s the chimney you see first. It seems to watch you as you come near – a sullen, domineering thing – and though it seems out of place here, a

fragment of Bristol's industrial past, the hill has become unimaginable without it. If you go there, you often see people standing at its base, placing their hands against the stones, or else crawling into the chimney's hollow centre, through a small opening on its southern side. Today, the chimney leans at a slight angle, as if considering falling over, but its lean will probably outlast us all. For more than two hundred years it's guarded its position on the hill, and, before it topples, it will see many more storms and frosts, many more convulsions and revolutions.

I have lived in Bristol for more than ten years now and have been to Troopers Hill many times before. In the past, though, I always used it as a thoroughfare to other places – to the river that skirts its southern edge, or to the small woodland to the west. But last year I started visiting for the place itself, and for no other reason than to be with it. I would go there in the afternoons, after working on a nearby allotment I share with some friends, or in the evenings after dinner. On a clear day, you can see the beginning of the Mendip Hills, fifteen miles to the south, and an hour or so before dusk, the local residents will gather here, to watch as the sun sinks over the city.

And it was during those afternoons and evenings that I began to hear them – the crickets and grasshoppers of Troopers Hill. At first I was conscious only of a crackling in the grass, a dry static at the edge of my hearing. But when I came closer I began to hear other things – clicks and chirps, pulses and rattles. I would lie in a little hollow on the side of the hill, using my jumper as a pillow, and listen to the songs. And the more I listened, the more I realised how little I had listened before, and how much more there was to hear.

Halfway down the hill, toward the edge of the woods, the bare slope of Troopers Hill gives way to patches of springy heather and tussocks of tall grass. And as I returned here day after day, and as spring turned into summer, I began to realise that these tussocks were alive. In the daytime, they bristled with grasshoppers, and in the evenings, they pulsed with the songs of crickets.

The creatures all had different things to say. One sounded like a reluctant maracas-player whose bandmates had wandered away, while another made a quick rasping sound, as if compulsively sharpening a knife. Another sounded like a free-spinning bicycle wheel, and yet another made the sound of two pebbles clicking together. Crickets generate sound by rubbing one wing against the other, while grasshoppers rub their legs against their wings. I like that. Theirs is a full-bodied singing. They live deeply on the surface of things, shaking sound from their bodies.

After listening to their songs, I began to look for them. Some were easily discovered — you could flush them out of the grass with your feet — while others sang from deep within cover and fell silent whenever you came near. But soon I learned there was a knack to it; you needed to take off your shoes, so that your rustling did not alert them, and the first one I found in this manner was a dark bush-cricket. It was strange to look at. Its legs were bent at a comical angle, and it was joined up like a set of gears, all whirring parts and intersecting levers. Its wavering antennae were delicate and long and the mask on its face was hard and rigid. It chirped, fell silent, chirped, then fell silent again, and once it realised I wasn't going to swallow it whole, it chirped more regularly. Its wings trembled as it sang. It was wonderfully brown — a brown of dark and densely woven grains. It seemed too small for this big world. It clung tightly to the stem of a swaying stalk.



Dark Bush Cricket - Michael Malay

Crickets sing late into the evenings, whereas grasshoppers end their shifts late in the afternoons. And as I spent more time on Troopers Hill, it was this night music that moved me the most, the sounds of crickets singing in the dark. I would lie in the grass, listening to their calls, and sometimes I would hear the voices of passers-by, as they walked up or down the Hill:

A man saying to his phone — I don't know what the rules are. Can we even see each other?

And a woman confiding to a friend -- I know it's not right, but I just can't read the news anymore. I just can't.

And as these voices emerged and subsided, the songs of crickets remained beneath it all — as it always has:

Crick! Crick! Crick!

What was I hearing on the hill? Joy? Consolation? No, it was the sound of pure need. For the lives of crickets are short, and they have urgent work to do in the one summer of their lives: mates to find, burrows to dig, eggs to lay. And yet, even though their songs have no reference to us, I found that they offered a kind of companionship anyway. Their calls were like little happenings in the field, small exclamations and earth-hymns. And sometimes, when I returned from Troopers Hill at night, I would find that the place

had followed me home, there in the grass that clung to my socks, and in the faint synaptic whirring in my brain, the sound of crickets in my ears as I lay in bed. Their songs were like the accumulated latencies of the earth, rising up from the exhausted soil, saying I'm here, I'm here, I'm still here.

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For those living in east Bristol, Troopers Hill is hard to miss. It rises steeply above the River Avon, twenty acres of open hillside among the terraced houses of St George. In a part of town that's otherwise covered with houses and roads, the suddenness of this rocky hill feels like strange, like a wild and colossal gift. But it also feels like an aberration, like something that doesn't belong. And the more I learned about the history of Troopers Hill, the more I realised how so much of its beauty was the result of damage. For hard things have happened to this place – things that have deformed and undermined the hill. And it's because of this history, not in spite of it, that Troopers Hill is a nature reserve.

Two hundred years ago, this was a place of work. On the eastern side of the hill, men quarried sandstone, and at the bottom of the hill they smelted copper. The copper was used to produce brass, which was then beaten into pots and pans by Bristol's working class, who were employed in mills along the river. Later, many of these brass goods were traded for people who had been enslaved in West Africa. During the smelting, the sky above Troopers Hill would have been darkened by smoke, the ground covered with ash, and the more the smoke went up, the richer the merchants of Bristol became.

And the reason the copper was produced here was because the coal was here. Three hundred million years ago, Troopers Hill was a tropical swamp filled with giant horsetails, tree ferns, club mosses and tall woody plants. Aeons later, after the swamps and plants fossilised with time, humans began to sink pits into the ground and to enter them with tallow candles fixed to their hats. Others followed them over the decades, and the more the miners went down in search for coal, the more the city of Bristol grew up around them.

And so, over the years, the hill has been transformed. Rubble has been dumped here, chemicals have contaminated the soil, and the face of the hill has been dug into and chipped away. And all this has altered the very nature of the place.

Unwittingly, though, all this damage has led to a kind of flourishing. Because of the quarrying and the mining and the smelting, the soil here has lost its original character; and because it's become acidic and thin, its home to a habitat that exists nowhere else in Bristol. Wildflowers thrive in the nutrient-poor soil, including heath bedstraw, sheep

sorrel, and mouse-ear hawkweed. And with the plants have come the creatures. Two years ago, an ecologist found more than three hundred insect species on Troopers Hill, an extraordinary amount for a small nature reserve.

The British Isles are covered with spoiled places: coal-tips, brownfield sites, derelict land. Too often, though, we write these places off as wastelands, as places beyond healing or repair. But many of them deserve a closer look. In south Wales, entomologists are finding a dazzling abundance of insects in former collieries, including species that are new to science. In Scotland, just outside of Edinburgh, the enormous slag-heaps generated by oil extraction have become important refuges for plants and animals. And 30 miles east of London, in a place called Canvey Wick, nature has recolonised an abandoned oil refinery. Today, the site is home to thousands of species, from the common to the rare to the endangered, all of them sharing the wildlands of this strange, post-industrial place.

Not everything we have damaged will come good again, at least in our lifetimes. In so many places, the injury has been too great. But if many landscapes are in need of healing, there are also those places that have found their way back to health, although not in ways we intended or planned. These are the abundant places we did not know we were looking for. And although they rebuke us with their strength, they also educate us with their presence, reminding us of the vitality that can sometimes emerge from damaged land. The wild goes on, they tell us. The wild goes on and on.

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It is late winter, and I am by the chimney again, watching as rain approaches from the south. I have been thinking of last summer, and remembering the time when this hill was filled with the sounds of crickets and grasshoppers. In a few weeks, they would be appearing again, filling the tussocks with new life. In fact, they were here now, in some form, as eggs hiding in the crook of a stalk of grass, or in small burrows underground. Soon, these eggs would split open, and the grass would remember its songs again.

Two months ago, the ground here was locked in a frost, and the wind was bitterly cold. The eggs will survive that. And a few weeks ago, the hill was transformed by snow – snow that made people laugh again, and that brought children rushing out with their sleds. After the snow melted, small rivers of mud appeared on the slopes, transforming the hill yet again. The eggs will survive that too.

And as I think of the eggs, I am reminded of something that happened a few days ago, when I walked past someone's garden and overheard a young boy calling out to his father, 'Look how brue it is!' And for some reason, although I can't explain why, his

mispronunciation of 'blue' filled me with a surge of hope and tenderness. It reminded me of the goodness of the world, and how its supply of beauty and innocence ran deep.

I begin to turn for home, and as I do, the light on the horizon seems to quicken, and the energy of the wind changes. I stop and smell the air – it is fresh, and moist, and animated – and when something in my body begins to tingle, I know that it has happened. Winter had ended, just then, just at that moment. The spring was coming back.



**Michael Malay in St George Park**

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Original script by Michael Malay, lecturer in English literature and the environmental humanities at the University of Bristol.

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Troopers Hill**

Troopers Hill Local Nature Reserve is owned by Bristol City Council and managed by Bristol Parks Service working in partnership with Friends of Troopers Hill. Learn more about the wildlife and history of Troopers Hill at [www.troopers-hill.org.uk](http://www.troopers-hill.org.uk)