The Dragonfly Diaries

The unlikely
story of Europe's
first dragonfly
sanctuary

"One of Britain's greatest
living naturalists"
CHRIS PACKHAM

Ruary Mackenzie Dodds

“Ruary is not only a notable dragonfly expert but perhaps more importantly the greatest ambassador these insects have had in the UK … This lovely book catalogues his journey and charts his many successes. It cements his status as one of Britain’s greatest living naturalists. One dragonfly on his shirt led to all this … thank goodness it pitched there!” Chris Packham

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“Ruary is not only an expert on dragonflies but a gifted storyteller whose enthusiasm inspires as it entertains. This is a fascinating, informative and extremely readable book.” Malize McBride

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“A fascinating memoir… Zen and the art of pond watching.” Andrew Callander

‘Order of the Geek’ Award BBC *Springwatch*

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The unlikely story
of Europe's first
dragonfly sanctuary

Ruary Mackenzie Dodds

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Part One

Catching the Bug

1980 to 1990

Chapter 1

SATURDAY, JUNE 15TH, 1985: DENHAM

I'm standing on the towpath of the Grand Union Canal at Denham, holding a camera, alone in the sunshine, trying to relax from my super-pressurized job in Kensington. I'm here to get a dose of fresh air, soak up the calm, maybe take a few arty photographs.

A dragonfly lands on my shirt, and three things happen, lightning fast. *One*: I don't really like insects, but I'm completely comfortable with this amber-black thing sitting above my heart. *Two*: I actually look at a dragonfly, properly, for the first time in my life. It's beautiful. I feel a strange sense of wonder. *Three*: the dragonfly says, 'Why not photograph dragonflies?' and vanishes in a whirr of wings.

I'm left with the oddest feeling, much stronger than just an idea about photography. It's … I don't know. Something a bit like a *déjà-vu*, but not. An intuition?

I live in central London but I'm always seeking out quiet places: parks, woodlands and especially canals. Canals are like veins of peace; glass-smooth and thin, slipping discreetly past noisy factories and under busy streets. Bits are ugly, bits are dangerous, but the part I'm in right now threads through a mile-long fragment of countryside somehow left behind in the middle of all the bricks and concrete.

The Grand Union at Denham is bounded to the south by the roar of the M40, and to the north by trains heading to High Wycombe and beyond. It's a little area of leafy, watery quiet. The banks of the canal are lined with old oaks. Keeping company with the canal is the River Colne, and there are several broad gravel pits, worked out now and filled with water. It's the combination of canal, river and placid lakes that makes the place so attractive.

Anyway, I started to photograph dragonflies. Things have changed a bit since 1985. I'd have a digital camera now, and I wouldn't have to wait for prints to come back, but I'd still need a sunny day, a great deal of patience, and clothes I didn't mind getting seriously dirty. I'd still have to be ready to crawl and I'd probably end up with wet shoes.

After many attempts, the first successful picture I got was of a damselfly, not a dragonfly. When I took the photo I didn't know the difference between the two, but now I do: when it lands, if it leaves its wings out flat like an aeroplane, it's a dragonfly. If it folds them neatly back, along what I kept calling its fuselage until I learned it's the abdomen, it's a damselfly. Of course, as with most simple definitions there are exceptions, but just being aware of that difference means I already know more about Odonata than 99.9% of the world's population. Odonata is the proper name for the Order that includes both dragonflies and damselflies.

Kari, my partner (we're married now), got that first success. She didn't actually do any crawling or camera stuff, but her hawk-eyes spotted a tiny blue triangle in the grass. We were wandering through a field close to the canal later that summer. It had begun to cloud over. We'd decided we were out of luck when suddenly Kari pointed. I dropped to my knees and crept forward, warily as a cat. Into the viewfinder came an insect the colour of lapis lazuli, half of each elegant wing stained a deeper blue. I was transfixed. I've used that picture of a Banded Demoiselle (*Calopteryx splendens*, its Sunday name) again and again, on interpretation boards and in talks. Every time I see it, I feel the sense of wonder and victory – and something else, something hard to define – that shot through me on that quiet morning. Did I really take that in Denham, Middlesex? Did we only have to take the Central Line to West Ruislip then walk a bit? Not have to trek into the Brazilian jungle?

Hawk-Eye Kari had spent ten years of her adult life in New York. Like me, she wasn't interested in insects, but, almost as soon as I got the dragonfly-photography bug she showed an extraordinary ability to spot them. Genetic maybe; her grandfather, Charles Rothschild, was a pioneer of nature conservation, her mother Pannonica was named after a moth, and her Aunt Miriam was one of the world's leading authorities on fleas.

I never knew Charles Rothschild; he died in 1923. But I knew Nica and Miriam well. I met Miriam first. She wasn't exactly an ordinary person, and her home at Ashton Wold wasn't an ordinary house. They've gone now. I still go back, but only in my head. And in my heart.

SATURDAY, MARCH 22ND, 1980: LONDON

(Five years earlier)

I don't feel very well, but I'm ignoring it. Kari and I are in a little Citroën Dyane heading for Ashton Wold, on our way to see Kari's Aunt Miriam. I don't know much about her. Kari's very fond of her and wants us to meet. I'm told she's a flea expert, a serious fighter for wildflowers, and fellow of the Royal Society. Clearly not a lightweight.

The journey from London in the underpowered Dyane seems to take years but at about midday, we turn into a scene so twee it could be a film set: thatched houses ring a village green, and at the top is a thatched pub, the Chequered Skipper. We've arrived? Wrong. We drive through the village to a lodge and a gate, beside which is a sign:

NOTICE: NO PERSON IS PERMITTED TO TRESPASS
IN ASHTON IN SEARCH OF INSECTS.

We head up the private road. Later I hear this is called the 'drive', but that's a nonsense: it's nearly two miles of the bumpiest track imaginable, with potholes as long and as deep as trenches. The Citroën's suspension is built for French *pavé*, but as we crash and sway uphill I'm sure other cars soon fall to pieces under this treatment.

Eventually we reach Ashton Wold at the top. The track leads through lines of overgrown laurels and we run parallel to what is obviously the outside of a walled garden with potting sheds and a tired-looking Fergy tractor. Then we veer off round the service side of the house, so I can't work out the actual size of the place, but it's certainly big; and I like the look of its mullioned windows. As we swing round the bend I notice, in a copse beside the track, a moss-covered mountain of stone blocks topped by five upside-down cast iron baths, each with four fat little legs in the air.

We leave the car at one end of a small courtyard and go through a large white door at the other. The loud bang as it closes behind us echoes down the long, bare, whitewashed corridor ahead. At once we hear the sound of distant barking and a patter of many paws on parquet, and as we round the corner into an even longer much more elegant corridor, a pack of shelties – led by a small black mongrel – is hurtling towards us. I'm usually all right with dogs; not with this lot. They're after our ankles. On subsequent visits, I know to dodge smartly into the kitchen on the right and slam the door behind me, but not now.

'Come here!' yells an imperious female voice. 'Come here, I say.'

I look at Kari.

'She means the dogs,' says Kari, hopping sideways.

The seething, fanged mass of brown, white and black fur subsides and trots reluctantly back down the corridor into a distant set of rooms.

'Kari?' yells the voice again. 'Is that you?'

'Hello, Miriam,' Kari calls.

'With you in a minute. Help yourself to a drink. Sunday! Moonie! Come here!'

Kari and I walk into the library. As with the word 'drive', 'library' is a misnomer. It's a vast, bright, oak-panelled room, walled by ceiling-high bookshelves. At one end is a mighty mantelpiece with a Stanley Spencer painting of lilacs above it and a roaring fire below. Ranged round the fireplace are three massive sofas, each covered with a white throw and each showing signs of considerable doggy activity. At the other end of the room stands a concert-size Steinway and, under an enormous leadlight window, a long table piled high with brand new books: art, architecture, biographies, novels, scientific journals and Jewish politics. In the middle of the room is another table on which is a giant vase of (real) lilacs, and, nestled in the porchway looking out to the garden, another table with an array of drinks that would impress the most jaundiced of barmen. It includes vodka. I hover, uncertain. Kari taps the top of the vodka bottle.

'A big one,' she says. I obey and hand her a thumping glassful. She works at the same outfit as I do. She's Head of Marketing. I've watched her keep pace with very hard drinkers. Personally – and uncharacteristically – I settle for a glass of sherry.

I see the wellingtons first; they're white; I haven't seen any like that since my doctor father played Santa Claus at his local hospital in Lincolnshire. Then I see the dress, a beautifully cut billowy silk affair, white and violet. Then the scarf, also violet, tied so as to reveal sweeping curls of silver hair. A pale, almost translucent face; a sharp nose; high cheekbones; very piercing, fleeting eyes; and a sudden powerful presence.

'Hello,' says Miriam. 'Who are you?'

'I …'

'Oh yes, I remember. Kari rang. Have a drink.'

'I have one, thank you. Would you …?'

'No. Have you seen the snake's head fritillaries? On the tennis court. Go and look. Stay on the path. Lunch at one.'

We go out through the garden door and down pale spacious limestone steps to a terrace, then down more steps to another terrace and, brushing aside overgrown white lilacs, down yet more steps to the tennis court. It isn't a tennis court. I'm getting used to this. Yes, it has been, but now it's a yellow carpet of cowslips, dotted with purple fritillaries, with a tiny path weaving diagonally across it to a long rampart facing south. I leave Kari, bent over, gazing at the wildflowers, and tiptoe down the path. In the corner it leads to a hidden stairway. At the bottom is a wrought-iron gate to another overgrown garden. I can see a lily pond, and, on another terrace, a ruined thatched dovecote. There's the faintest air of sadness.

I turn and look back at the mansion. It's half-hidden by untrimmed trees, but, with its golden stonework and its mullions, it looks like a very large Edwardian version of a Sussex ironmaster's house, albeit strangely truncated. I discover later that, back in the Fifties, Miriam had all the roofs taken off, the entire middle floor removed, then the roofs put back on. As the masons took the stones down, they numbered each one and piled them all in that copse close to the house, then put the baths on top.

Kari calls me back and makes me crouch down to look at a snake's head fritillary. On its tiny, grape-red, bent-over bell of petals are minute brown flecks, repeating uniformly like a fleur-de-lis wallpaper pattern in miniature. We go back up to the house. As we walk back into the library, Miriam is on the phone.

'Well, you can tell the Lord Chancellor he'll have to cut his speech,' she says, and puts the phone down. I've heard her before, when she's rung Kari at our London flat. She never says goodbye. She swings round.

'Look here, there's no food. Margaret's not here. We'll have to go and scrounge.' The black mongrel is now gazing adoringly up at her. 'Come on, Sunday,' she says.

She leads the way into the dining room; another massive space, also oak-panelled, but a lighter shade, almost white. In the centre of the room is a grand table. I count fourteen Chippendale chairs round it. In a long daffodil-lined alcove by the window there's another table. The smaller one can accommodate at least a dozen, too, but it's set for three. There are two sideboards: the nearest has ashets of cold duck, cold roast beef, cold ham, smoked mackerel, peas, tomatoes, salads of different sorts, beetroot, potato salad, fennel and celery. Miriam's idea of scrounging. On the far sideboard stands a small army of pickles, mayonnaises, mustards and sauces. I glance at them appreciatively.

'I hope you like quail's eggs,' says Miriam. 'Pour the wine, will you? None for me.'

The wine is a sparkling white, Pétillant Deux-Sèvres.

‘You’ll never guess what Sid’s done,’ says Miriam, turning to Kari, and so begins a long conversation about the farm and the family. I tuck into the eggs, and then the duck.

‘Have some more, Ruary,’ orders Miriam.

‘I’m fine, thank you, that was delicious,’ I say.

‘Oh, go on,’ she says testily. ‘There’s tons there.’

After the meal, we go upstairs, through the spacious billiards room, to the bedroom we’ve been allocated. Separate beds. It’s crammed with portraits and photographs of the family. I lie down and begin to feel unwell again. I shouldn’t have eaten that vast lunch. It gets worse. I start to sweat. Eventually I tell Kari I won’t be able to come down for tea.

‘You’ve got to,’ she says. ‘Tea’s important.’

‘I can’t. I’ll throw up.’

‘Miriam hates sick people.’

‘Well, we’d better go back to London, while I can still drive. I’m really not right.’

‘I’ll go and tell her,’ she says.

Kari goes downstairs, breaks the news, and an hour later, after I’ve built up strength, we repack and go out to the car. As we load our stuff, Miriam appears from the walled garden. She sees me, continues coming towards the house, but gives me a very wide berth, taking care to keep at least fifteen metres away.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11TH, 1980: ASHTON WOLD

After an enormous lunch – roast duck and Château La Cardonne claret – Kari and I go through that wrought-iron gate I saw on my first visit, past the lily pond, through another iron gate and into the deer-field. Under a dark sky, we’re walking down to Ashton Water. I haven’t been there before and we’re with Kari’s cousins – Miriam’s children – Charlotte and Charles. They both have auburn hair, very bright against the greyness of the day. They have their own flats within the house, and Ashton is their home when they aren’t working in London.

We head downhill through woodland trampled by deer to a lake that looks like something out of Africa: bare, muddy and pocked with thousands of hoof-marks. There's the Top Pond upstream of it with the same devastated look, and between them stands a small ten-sided building with a faded duck-egg blue door, the observation hut. The thatch is badly damaged. As well as a conical thatched roof, it has thatched walls and odd-shaped, many-paned broken windows on one side only, all looking out over the lake. I peer in through one of the jagged glass rectangles: nothing except a pile of hay, an empty bottle and a broken three-legged chair, lying sideways on a perfectly laid wooden floor that even through the dust and grime looks good enough to dance on.

The lake has two little islands and is surrounded by old willows, some so tall as to have dropped whole boughs that have fallen and reared up again as separate trees. The water is a flat brown. Even at that moment, as we walk round the margin of the lake, talking of nothing in particular, our voices echoing over the silent still surface, I have a strange feeling. This lake is calling to me.