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David Clement-Davis. *Fire Bringer.* New York: Dutton Press, 2000. 498 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-525-46492-1.

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Permeating Species Boundaries

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After eons of living in the traditional way of the Red Deer of Scotland, one stag has broken the law and become Lord of the Herd, surrounding himself with a corps of young stags and devoting his energy and theirs not to the cycle of life, but to dominating first the deer and then all the animals. A prophecy remembered by a Red Deer storyteller promises a hero whose unique bond with all creatures will lead the animals back to the old ways. *Fire Bringer* tells the tale of the birth of that hero, Rannock, and the journey that leads to the fulfillment of the prophecy. Since deer, not the humans scattered across the deer's northern English and Scottish territories, are Clement-Davis's main characters, something of the magic of shape-changing is necessary for the novel's human reader to step out of a human and into a Red Deer's skin in order to accompany Rannock on his journey.

And, in fact, deep into the journey, the narrator suggests, "If [an] onlooker could have changed his shape and traveled with them for a while, he might have learned something of their hearts and their needs and of what they saw as they looked out at the world" (pp. 271-272). At the juncture at which the storyteller chooses to reveal his technique for creating reader empathy, the little band of deer led by Rannock, the young stag hero, have themselves "come to the edge of Herla's [deer's] own myths" (p. 272)–a fit place for boundary shifting–and close to the heart of the prophecy that serves as a catalyst for the novel's plot.

Fellow British novelist Richard Adams, in a blurb quoted on the back cover of *Fire Bringer*, calls novels like Clement-Davis's (and, of course, Adams's own *Watership Down*) "anthropomorphic fantasies." In part he uses the term ironically, because his own novels have certainly been criticized for their anthropomorphism, for being more about humans than about the rabbits who are the true protagonists of his novel. Adams's animal characters, like Clement-Davis's, talk, have myths and sacred stories and storytellers, healers and mystics, legends and leaders, feelings and imaginations–characteristics that our own culture story's fantasy assures believers belong only to humans. Frequently such works are categorized as children's literature and, indeed, children who enjoyed *Watership Down* or *Harry Potter* will respond well to *Fire Bringer*. Adults who are finding themselves engrossed by the Potter series and who relished being challenged by *Watership Down* will find Clement-Davis's novel equally rich.

Both *Watership Down* and *Fire Bringer* are epics (the former patterned consciously on *The Odyssey*), a form by now firmly associated with Western patriarchal culture. And, in many ways, the structure of both rabbit and deer society as these authors see it is equally patriarchal. But both novels, Clement-Davis's more recent one in particular, also undercut patriarchal patterns. Does like Rannock's mother Eloin play more than a biological part in both plots, predictably having a more crucial role in working out Clement-Davis's plot against the unnatural dictatorship that has come to disrupt the age-old patterns of the deer than they do in *Watership Down*.

There is little doubt that Clement-Davis knows and consciously models his novel on Adams's. The dominant stag, Sgorl, and his successor are reminiscent of Adams's General Woundwort. Both writers associate these individuals' rise to power with the rise of Nazism and the devastation that they cause among their own kind with the Holocaust. The deer in a park protected and fed by the nobility to assure themselves of having ample prey for their hunts echoes Strawberry's warren in *Watership Down*. These semi-domesticated deer, like Adams's rabbits, show signs of a loss of their kind's culture as deadly to the survival of the species as Sgorl and Woundwort's violence. Interestingly, a similar observation is made in Felix Salten's *Bambi*, another antecedent of *Fire Bringer*. Bambi's cousin, who had been rescued and cared for by humans, is as a result of human interference unable to rise to the demands of life in the wild when he returns

to the herd. Interestingly, however, Clement-Davis questions Salten's conclusion that any contact with humans is deadly to the wild and its wild beings. His Rannock is also rescued and nursed by humans. But the encounter, rather than suggesting that all contact with humans must turn wild deer into vapid park dependents, leads to the development of an empathy between deer and human rescuer. The boy, sadly but knowing what he does is right for the deer, offers Rannock his freedom, and the deer chooses, also not without regret, to return to his own kind. Each is wiser as a result, not weaker as in Salten. This interspecies symbiosis is also at work in *Watership Down*, in which the rabbit "hero" leaves the human who has saved and nursed him back to health with more wisdom than he had before the encounter (although it is not wisdom that is, finally, as crucial to the working out of the plot as is the case in *Fire Bringer*).

The true antecedents of Clement-Davis's novel, however, are not *Bambi* or even *Watership Down*, but earlier Scottish novelists' treatments of the Scottish Red Deer. Less well-known now than Adams, but well worth the attention of readers in this age of ecofeminist sensibilities, Sir John Fortesque, Richard Jeffries, and Henry Williamson each wrote fictions in which the red deer of Scotland emerged as sentient, speaking protagonists and lived in herds that, like Rannock's, have not only a class system but a culture. Jefferies' *Red Deer*, which appeared in 1884, has gone through many subsequent editions. Edna Manning (who edited *Richard Jeffries: A Modern Appraisal* [1984]) calls it "the most realistic account of blood sport ever written" not because it depicted blood sport but because it convinced her that "Jefferies wrote about wild animals from inside their very skins" (p. 81). No better commentary on Fortesque's *The Old Stag and Other Stories* (1898) and *The Story of a Red-Deer* (1895) exists than that of his admirer, Henry Williamson. Taking Fortesque as his own master, Williamson wrote that Fortesque recreated "the life of a wild red deeŕeven as the deer" told it to him in the chase. This bond and respect between predator and prey, reminiscent of that found in a number of hunter-gatherer traditions, defies simple dualistic judgment, just as Clement-Davis seems to counter the same mind-set in depicting relationships that develop between Rannock and the wolves who are his natural predators and between Rannock and humans. It is in these earlier novels that individual Red Deer does like Fortesque's Aunt Yield are first seen as strong leaders and able allies.

In the 1930s Williamson wrote his own nonfiction study of the ways of the Red Deer, *The Wild Deer of Exmore*, following it by his own fictional account in *The Old Stag and Other Hunting Stories* (1933). His protagonist, Stumberleap, is obviously modeled on Fortesque's Red Deer. The salient accomplishment is the ability shared by these four authors to create Red Deer characters who, rather than allegorical humans, remain believably nonhuman–remain deer who, like all animals, possess qualities humans share but to which they cannot lay sole claim.

Clement-Davis, writing three decades after *Watership Down*, fifty years after Salten and Williamson, and over a hundred years after Jeffries and Fortesque, has a stronger sense than they do of all the species–human and nonhuman, predator and prey–being not only united by habitat but by a web far more complex. Thus, as the final mystery of the prophecy is worked out, Rannock is helped by all the Lera (folks of the wild) as well as by the boy, now a man, who once before had been his rescuer. As they become allies, they realize that no one species, working alone, can survive, far less bring about a resolution so favorable to the welfare of the whole as marks the conclusion of Clement-Davis's *Fire Bringer*.

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