

a Dog,  
a Gun,  
Time *and*  
Enough

George Bird Evans

*Photographs by Kay Evans*

OLD  
HEMLOCK



1987

*Other upland gunning books by George Bird Evans:*

THE UPLAND SHOOTING LIFE (1971)  
THE BEST OF NASH BUCKINGHAM (1973)  
TROUBLES WITH BIRD DOGS (1975)  
THE RUFFED GROUSE BOOK (1977)  
THE WOODCOCK BOOK (1977)  
RECOLLECTIONS OF A SHOOTING GUEST (1978)  
THE BIRD DOG BOOK (1979)  
THE UPLAND GUNNER'S BOOK (1979)  
AN AFFAIR WITH GROUSE (1982)  
MEN WHO SHOT (1983)  
NASH BUCKINGHAM'S LETTERS TO JOHN BAILEY (1984)  
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GROUSE ALONG THE TRAMROAD (1986)

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# Conversation by Firelight

*I thought of it as always autumn.*

Recollections of a Shooting Guest (G.B.E.)

Now that October with its colors blazing, Indian summer's reality of dreams bringing woodcock winging across the Hunter's Moon if only in our minds, an urgency to live suspended in golden smells of leaves and heightened senses, a witchery of memories of all the dogs we have possessed, of game birds we have loved and shot, secret places we have known, going almost before it has come October is an alchemy transforming gunning into rapture.

On a night like this, rain and moaning wind have their way with the hemlocks towering above the house and I worry about what might happen, now that our big trees have so many years on them. The rain drums against the windows and a yellow maple leaf pasted against one of the small panes is like a summer moth trying to reach the warm light of the lamp inside. A line storm of this proportion will bring the 'cock and there will soon be whitewash splashings on damp leaf pack under aspens.

Dinner's candlelight has died down like the fire settling with quiet sounds into embers on the andirons, a peaceful aftertime of gunning. Wet gun barrels and oil-finished walnut have been carefully wiped dry, bores polished and dressed, there has been a hot tub and dinner with a good wine to reflect the firelight, and Belton and Quest, their coats almost dry after the rain that drove us in, usurp more than their share of the sofas, dreaming of the grouse today that didn't give us chances for a shot, although two were pointed handsomely.

Experience comes with fulfillment, replacing naïve eagerness, no less keen but richer for living and enjoying. It is there in coverts with your dog and your gun, the more in harmony for age on the three of you. Youth with fire in the belly was good but never great; gunning should be an act of love, not labor. Time, the precious thing that pays out living, giving much, taking much away, in the giving and the taking teaches us to live. I see it in my setters. Quest with the gorgeous flame in his genes, has changed position and is lying at my feet, inert in blessed sleep. His is the tired sleep of youth with energies drained in impetuous outpour of questing, culminated in the moment when mind and linebred instincts took fire and burned in the glory of a point. Belton with the same fire in the same genes but with the *angst* of past doubts and knowing, twitches in his dreams, less sound asleep, more analytical. Orange belton youth, blue belton maturity; sweet sleep, Quest, with less to dream about. You have years in front of you, and they'll be good years if I have my way, but Belton has his years richly lived where nothing but Death can take them from him.

Like you, Belton, I have my days where they are secure—almost as many days in coverts as on the lovely old gun we live with, days precious for knowing how fragile and how transient. At no other season am I so aware of Time as in October, running out like the leaves sifting down around me, each leaf exposing the delicate bones of trees. Letting the kittens out at dawn I found a chrome yellow sugar maple leaf on wet raw umber earth, and as I watched, another, reminding me the year is fleeting. It is a season to be lived with the dogs and the birds and the shooting, each day a jewel and no jewel lost. It brings me to my senses, senses that I feel with.

The gift of Autumn is a theme come back each year, like the last movement of the Sibelius *First*. Yesterday I looked up into our golden maples and everything I saw was heaven, the aching beauty of these mountains that all my life have had me and I them, from the time when as a boy I loved them without understanding the meaning of love.

Much of what we know is a matter of Time. Two black-framed parchment deeds on white paneling in the Long Room tell that this land was conveyed in 1782 and 1783, placing the period when the

hewn-log outside walls were set up and the broad oak floorboards were laid. The converted flintlock over the mantelpiece in that room was fashioned before 1800 and took its toll of deer and probably a bear or two down in Randolph County. At that time few smooth-bore fowling flintlocks were used in these Endless Mountains of "old" Virginia; bobwhites were gunned in the Tidewater but it was not until pointing dogs were brought in by outlanders that grouse were taken in a civilized manner in the highlands.

No one in this old house wrote about his shooting, although Meshach Browning who hunted twenty miles to the east and south of here, unable to write, dictated his tales in *Forty-Four Years of the Life of a Hunter*. As of now I have nearly two decades on you, Meshach.

In *The Blackwater Chronicle*, Philip Pendleton Kennedy wrote of a hunting and fishing trip into the Blackwater-Canaan in 1851. They found brook trout by the thousands in that virgin water, and bears and wolves and panthers, and rattlesnakes "not to be feared because the temperature was too cold." The only mention of grouse was in the description of Tower's Mountain House, where "sportsmen of that day resorted to fish for trout, hunt the deer, shoot pheasants, wild turkey, and woodcock in their season." On our grouse and 'cock shooting trips to the Canaan we pass the place where Tower's House had perched high above the North Branch of the Potomac in the mid-1800s and I wonder if those old gunners could have loved it all as much as I do. What other men did with their dogs and their guns in other places, other times, makes my gunning richer for their having yearned and failed or succeeded as I do on an autumn day.

Some of the driving rain manages to get down the big-throated chimney, sizzling as it strikes the blazing logs. One of them was left over from the great Springhouse Oak, a giant sprouted about 1620 and brought down by a freak summer storm. Bison at that time moved up the tributaries of the Ohio into this country, giving their name to Buffalo Run and Buffalo Creek, making trails the Indian hunting parties followed to these highlands.

Those were transient hunting braves who came here only for the game. A legend of this house relates that some of them used to camp along our Wagon Wheel Run a hundred yards to the north.

They left traces in the form of flint chips and arrowheads like the black flint lying on the window sill beside me. One night after the house was erected and lived in but still without chinking between the logs, two red men approached to "borrow fire." Unwilling to risk unbarring this door behind me, Samuel Robinet whose name is on our first deed passed glowing embers on a shovel through the space between the logs to the Indians outside. Robinet was a man of peace who knew how to keep trouble at a distance.

A downdraft from the wind forces a puff of woodsmoke into the room from the maw of the fireplace and the fire erupts a spray of gold sparks as I drop on two more logs and work them into place with the poker.

Staring at burning logs makes me reflective, and I look back on what have seemed the pulse points of my shooting life, not so much aging as coming of age, what living with dogs and guns and birds has meant—old Indian summer coming just for me, the North Porch Maple dropping her golden glory every year, Autumn's song of the earth, an arrested time with things and places I call mine returning in memory.

The need to grasp it all plays tricks, instilling a sense of hurry, an urge to cram as much into a hunting day as energy and daylight will allow. This can become a self-punitive drive that is not confined to American gunners. I have seen this change in the British *Shooting Times*, a permeating hard-bitten flavor (flavour?) stressing the misery of dragging up moor hills through knee-high heather, of mucking into muddy marshes, talk of "rough-shooting with a vengeance" without mention of beauty—the macho shouldering out the pleasure. The Type A pusher is not hard to find, struggling with his ego, viewing his game as an adversary and proving he can beat it, tearing through coverts with the pained expression of a jogger. He usually doesn't grow old.

Kay and I are surrounded with the deliberate growth of trees, slow change that is at the same time unchanging, timelessness of a house that has stood for two hundred and five winters and springs and summers and autumns, a stone springhouse that has sheltered the flow of mountain spring water for just as long.

As those of us who shoot become better shots and better understand handling our dog, our approach to gunning takes on depth and maturity. Going into coverts becomes less a chase with the sole purpose of killing; it remains important to find game but the gratification—and I keep coming back to that word—is in the beauty of finding it. The essence of the shot is how you shoot the bird, not how many; it is not necessary that you rise up early to get in coverts at first light, forcing an eight-hour day of labor, but that you go there when it is pleasant, a word too many gunners have forgotten. Plodding a given number of miles because someone said he hunted twenty in a day—fat chance—is not the object of gunning. Take it gently, with time to pause and savor the sherry smell of leaves; linger in those wonderful places at end of day when birds are content to lie to dogs.

In mid-October when leaves are at what the French call *haut couleur*, grouse sometimes appear in unpredictable places. At this latitude I can't rationalize this as fall dispersal; there aren't enough young grouse to feel crowded. I'm convinced these birds react to the flaming foliage with a kind of delirium, much as I do. Autumn is a reliving of Life as it is going, and I know an intense pleasure gunning alone with my dogs and Kay who understands what it means being in those glorious places we go back to each season.

Night thoughts before a fire bring strange imaginings. I try to picture a man like me living without Indian summer, without the shooting season through what would be a succession of gray drab days from September through December deprived of the sorcery of hazy afternoons and blue ridges and tea-smell of changing leaves, to exist without first-gold of sugar maples igniting into flame, no scarlet maples bleeding against a hill, no aspen copses with newly minted specie atremble in soft winds, no gray dogwood thickets with tiny ivory balls on crimson stems, no wine bouquet of wild grapes exposed by thinning hand-sized leaves to reveal the bounty, no small ticking sounds of slowly falling leaves on quiet air like lemon yellow seconds counting Time that won't come back. There would be no fermentation heady, that damp atavistic hormone odor stirring primordial memory, no pungency of gold aspen carpet on black earth rising to the nostrils to pull me as it pulls the woodcock;

no expectation strung to the breaking pitch walking past a pointing bundle of nerves as sharply tuned as I, both of us near to shaking from the ecstasy, none of those hyphenated smells and agonies and visions making it good in the juices of me, to make me go on living it after it has passed, remembering, wanting, starving for it to come again. Facing the end of the year like the end of day, I see Indian summer as an *intermezzo*, a brief span of heaven like a fantasy of Greek myth permitting a short return to Earth each year from some hinterland of spirits. It is easy to be hypnotized into believing it will last, and then the leaves on the North Porch Maple suddenly turn gypsy and are gone.

The fire on the hearth has burned low like contemplative conversation, and my fingers find Belton's head. I feel him cock an eyebrow toward Quest who has risen stiffly to stretch his long body into a yawn. There is a time for talk and a time for deep bone-weary sleep. There will be logs for other fires, shooting for other reminiscences, and there will be Octobers for as long as there are trees and leaves to turn and fall. Bitter as it is to see it go, the Indian summer of a gunner is no less sweet for being short.