

Just shy of sunup on a bitter January morning, I tramped up the lane leading to the 1805 center-chimney Cape Cod home where naturalist Edwin Way Teale spent the final chapter of his writing life. Short of the house, I turned north and climbed the steep path to Monument Pasture. My Pac boots ground granular snow, announcing my presence to every creature for



half a mile. But I had come, camera fixed to the tripod slung over my shoulder, to photograph a subject whose life is marked by flux and measured in geological time, demanding no stealth. I had come to capture the movement of Hampton Brook in its passage through Teale's beloved Trail Wood, to open the lens's leaf shutter for a long exposure – the aperture a pinhole – to capture the brook's serpentine lines washed by warm, early light. In truth, I aimed to capture a fragment of time, to freeze flowing water in gelatin emulsion, even as it ran to the confluence of the Shetucket and Quinebaug rivers, then to the estuarine headwaters of the Thames, and finally to spill into Long Island Sound.

That morning, however, I thought less of the intersection of rivers and more of the intersection of lives. In Teale's life I saw connections to my own: the nature ethic that guided him, the events that brought him and his wife Nellie from Baldwin, Long Island, on the New York side of the Sound, to Hampton, Connecticut, to Trail Wood, a place he declared his personal Eden and vowed to leave only in death. My hands ached from the cold as I set my tripod, racing at once against the rising sun and the rapid numbing of fingers. The thermometer hovered around zero degrees Fahrenheit as I took rapid readings with my old Minolta spotmeter. I shot several frames, recomposed, shot several more, threw camera to shoulder, and headed home – a place to which I too was a transplant, having left suburban southwestern Connecticut for an old farmhouse six miles east of Trail Wood, a place where my wife and I can raise our three children closer to the land.

In 1930, Edwin Way Teale still lived in Baldwin, working as a staff writer for *Popular Science Monthly* – a job he loathed, despite his begrudging gratitude for the extraordinary opportunities it provided him. One such opportunity was a trip to New London that year to gather firsthand research for an article slated for the December issue of the magazine. At the U.S. Naval Base at New London, Teale was greeted by Capt. John M. Ocker then boarded a USS O-1 submarine on the Groton shore.

# All rivers, all lives run to the sea

By Richard Telford



Above, Edwin Way Teale at his desk at *Popular Science Monthly* in New York City, where he worked from 1928 to 1937. Right, the farmhouse at Trail Wood is seen from the footbridge crossing the outflow of the lower pond on the property. Photo: Edwin Way Teale. Copyright Estate of Edwin Way Teale, University of Connecticut. Used with permission.

From there, he wrote later, “We slipped down the quiet Thames River to the choppy Long Island Sound.” As the vessel submerged, Teale clung to a ladder in the conning tower, the raised navigation and attack center of early submarines. Gazing out a high porthole at the rising waterline, he “could see the sunlight glinting on the waves, the buildings of New London crowding to the distant Connecticut shore, and a dark smudge like smoke – the far tip of Long Island.” Beneath the roiling surface, “. . . long chains of bubbles, large as marbles, drifted by.” This was the closest Teale came to wielding his acute eye for natural history, limited by the editorial strictures he disdained at *Popular Science*. He would write again about this dive fifteen years later, and yet again a half-century after that, so strongly did one image of this journey remain fixed in his memory.

Early in 1945, Teale was at work on *The Lost Woods*, a book of essays slated for publication that fall. He had resigned from *Popular Science* eight years earlier to become a full-time freelance writer. Teale wrote *The Lost Woods* under great strain. David Allen Teale, his only child, was deployed to Germany, fighting in the Battle of the Bulge and the ensuing march to Berlin. As Edwin began the second half of the book, David was declared Missing in Action in March of 1945 and by June confirmed dead. Though strenuous, the writing provided refuge. In a chapter titled “Submarine Butterflies,” Teale revisited his 1930 voyage from New London. Now he was free to write about the “terns and herring gulls [that] circled around us as we drifted for a moment with the propeller idle.” The “bubbles, large as marbles” in 1930 now “turned and shone like spheres of mercury. . . .”

To this magical underwater world, Teale added one more creature omitted from his 1930 article – the “submarine butterflies” of the chapter’s title: “At that moment, into the glowing water around the portholes, there drifted a yellow form, glowing, also. It

was filmy and translucent in the rays of the sunlight. It swirled this way and that in currents set up by the moving boat. Like a yellow butterfly, in leisurely flight, it swerved and circled and disappeared to the stern.” This first jellyfish was followed by “dozens, scores, half a hundred yellow forms that rode, as though on underwater wings, past the windows of the conning tower.” Teale used this anecdote to introduce the reader to the astounding life of the jellyfish, his writing at once an education and an evocation. Through it, the reader, who would never travel, corporeally speaking, to the depths of the sea, could do so in mind, Teale’s words the vehicle. In this way, Teale joined with Rachel Carson, who had recently brought readers into oceanic realms through *Under the Sea Wind*. Carson’s 1941 book had failed commercially, overshadowed by the United States’ entry into the Second World War, but it was later championed to reissuance and commercial success in part through Teale’s advocacy.

Later, Teale included several excerpts of Carson’s work in the 1952 anthology *Green Treasury*, which he edited. One of these excerpts, drawn from *The Sea Around Us*, included the following lines: “The sea lies all around us. . . . The continents themselves dissolve and pass to the sea, in grain after grain of eroded land. So the rains that rose from it return again in rivers. In its mysterious past it encompasses all the dim origins of life and receives in the end, after, it may be, many transmutations, the dead husks of that same life. For all at last return to the sea – to Oceanus, the ocean river, like the ever-flowing

stream of time, the beginning and the end.” Teale understood these cycles well, both ecologically and in the irrevocable losses that time wrought.

Like the Teales’ farmhouse, our 1770 Cape Cod was built on the crest of a hill, facing south and bordered to the north by a year-round running brook. Blackwell Brook starts at Baker’s Pond, just under a mile from our house, then flows south through a series of meandering natural sluices. It turns briefly to open water, its flow slowed by a simple dam at the Elliot Road bridge, then narrows again, flowing roughly 10 miles before pouring into the Quinebaug. It is the mirror course, in purpose if not length, of Hampton Brook’s flow into and out of the northern beaver pond at Trail Wood, then east of the house, exiting the Teales’ property near Mulberry Meadow. South of there, it enters the Little River, which in turn flows into the Shetucket. Roughly four miles north of Norwich, the Quinebaug enters the Shetucket, then flows to the Thames Estuary five miles south. This convergence of many waters, of life-teeming waters, flows 15 more miles, then meets the great salt ocean’s cusp, where Edwin Way Teale, nearly a century ago, boarded an O-1 submarine. There he was struck most forcefully not by the extraordinary, world-changing technologies of that craft, but by “submarine butterflies” drifting in scores beyond thick porthole glass. That image stayed with him to the end of his life, and now it resides in me. I write in the humbling shadows of Teale and Carson and others, their words frozen, living frames, fleeting waters captured then gone. Writing too, it seems, is a temporal river that runs to a temporal sea where living words are jumbled, lost, and found again.

On September 12, 1979, a half-century after he descended the conning tower at New London, Teale posed a seemingly simple question to an audience



Moon jellies are the most common type of jellyfish found in Long Island Sound. Photo: The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk



The opening page of Edwin Way Teale's December 1930 article on submarine safety, published in *Popular Science Monthly*. Copyright Estate of Edwin Way Teale, University of Connecticut. Used with permission.

of philosophers: "What is a lifetime?" Diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1974, he had been given six months to live. A slow-growing cancer elongated six months to six years, but, by the fall of 1979, as he spoke to The School of Philosophy in Concord, Mass., Teale knew his time was waning. To his typed notes, he added a private subscript: "My Last Lecture." In it, he argued that life's value lay largely in deriving meaning and pleasure from simple things, particularly those in nature. He returned again to that submarine ride in Long Island Sound. "The thing I remember most vividly," he told his audience, many of them long-time friends, "is the scores of jellyfish, pale yellow and shining in the backlighting, swirling past like butterflies. Here, too, I was obtaining my pleasure from simple things." Forty years later, we, too, can gather pleasure and meaning from such simple things in nature, but increasingly, exponentially, we threaten these simple things – and the complex, fragile systems they inhabit – through pollution in all forms on all scales: in Long Island Sound, in the greater Atlantic, in all the world's waters, in our own backyards.

What will our lifetimes be? What effect will they have? Teale's writings – and all meaningful writings – pose these questions to us. Where can the rivers, both marine and temporal, take us but to the sea? Edwin Way Teale, a naturalist by the age of six, spent his life asking and answering these questions. Our answers to these questions are profoundly consequential when the sea – and all of nature – is under ecological siege laid largely by our unchecked consumption: millions of tons of plastic waste, ocean acidification, mercury and other toxins bio-accumulated and bio-magnified up and down the trophic levels, global warming, rising sea levels, species loss. We are at once connected to and



"Coming Home," painted by Roxanne Steed as part of the Connecticut Audubon Society's Artist-in-Residence program at Trail Wood, shows the Teale home in July 2015. Used with artist's permission

Left, warm, early light bathes Hampton Brook as it courses through Trail Wood on a cold January morning. Photo: Richard Telford

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disconnected from the natural world, the former by biological necessity and the latter too often by short-sighted choice.

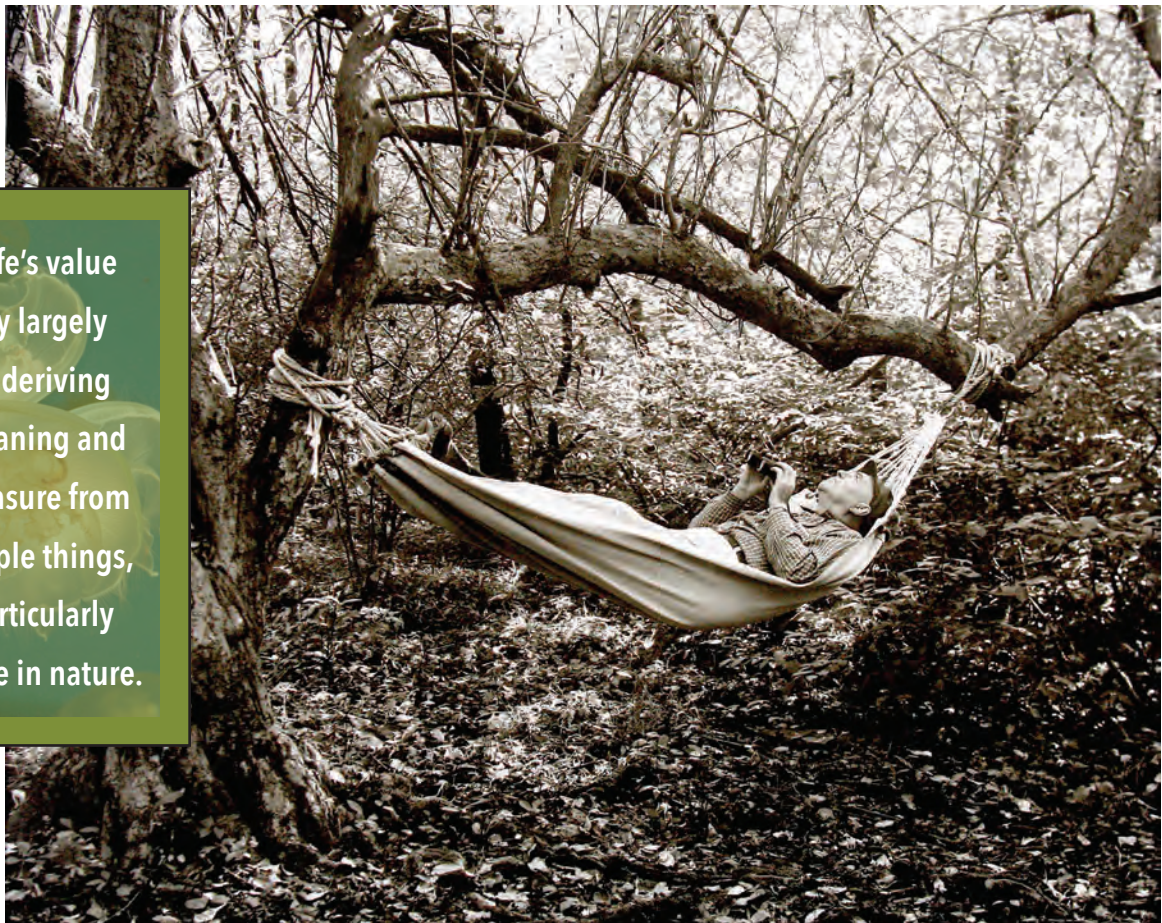
That winter morning at Hampton Brook, I watched the water's fleeting course, tried to capture several seconds of its sinuous movement. I felt the measured yet stopless passage of time. Edwin Way Teale came to Trail Wood, his Eden, in the summer of 1959. Twenty-one years later he left it to die at The William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich, less than 20 miles from the place he had once watched the gauzy, ephemeral forms of "submarine butterflies." For Teale, Baldwin and Trail Wood were worlds apart, one a suburban sprawl, the other a solitary paradise. Still, he must have stood countless times on the banks of Hampton Brook, understanding its seaward drive, understanding that nature does not truly allow disconnection, understanding that all rivers and all lives run to the sea. Like it or not, our fate is tied to that of nature and that of nature tied to us. When we ourselves return to Oceanus, what world will we have left behind?

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Above, a nesting Canada goose bathes in the slow-water section of Blackwell Brook above the Elliot Road bridge. Photo: Richard Telford

Below, Edwin Way Teale observes nature at Trail Wood from an Army surplus hammock sometime in the early to mid-1970s. Copyright Estate of Edwin Way Teale, University of Connecticut. Used with permission.



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