

22/2/65. "The tall handsome rooms were full of lovely things including a table covered with pots of flowers -- large pitcher orchids, jasmine, aconites and snowdrops -- and looked out on the beautiful frozen garden. Roaring fires, voluptuous cats;..."

Frances Partridge.

Driving home from the pub two toads are in the road by Addisford. I stop the car, they are females swollen with eggs and I help them across. It suddenly feels mild and spring-like, the temperature in the car tonight says 12° Celsius. Winter moths flutter in the car head lights. There is a marshy area to my left in the direction the toads were heading and I can hear the sound of males calling; a woman's prerogative, males always arrive at a spawning site first. The toads in my garden love the log pile. Raised on pallets the dampness underneath is a perfect dark hidey-hole of safety and hunting ground. Palmate newts abide in an old boiling pan sunk into the ground. Once the youngsters leave the water after their tadpole stage they live exclusively on land for a couple of years until sexually mature and they return to being aquatic again. The juveniles live amongst protection of the cracks and crevices in the raised beds and terraces I constructed over ten years ago. These also offer refuge and places to bask for lizards which flit about in sun and shady leaves as they hunt out insects. Under sheets of corrugated iron live colonies of slow worms they thrive in the warm dark dryness of this environment. Neither worm nor snake they are lizards too and as summer progresses they are joined by their young; they don't lay eggs as many reptiles do but give birth directly to live thread-like miniature versions of themselves. Occasionally there are grass snakes; sinisterly coiled, poisonous looking, they're harmless, I once saw a buzzard fly over with one hanging from its beak.

When I lived in Sussex the weather was so much more predictable than here. We rarely had the sort of day when there is heavy rain from dawn to evening, also no more near so much of that drizzly misty rain that makes everything so soaking wet. What I don't miss here in Devon are the searing easterly winds blowing icy air straight off the continent, "A wind from the east blows no good for man nor beast". Frozen dry air is blasted into even the most cosily sheltered corner, they would bring with them a black frost. In Devon the weather is far more chaotic and local, from the coast to a moor, in a valley or rolling hills a few kilometres difference is just a tiny step in distance but meteorologically it can be a massive stride. A device that I find most useful is called a Zambretti Forecaster. Made-up of a series of discs and pointers it is a weather computer. You first set the appropriate arrow to wind direction. Then next check your barometer. Then move the inner dial to point at the corresponding millibars on the middle dial. See whether the pressure is rising or falling or staying the same and you will see in a window a letter that relates to the pressure reading. Turn the Forcaster over and on the back tells you what each letter represents: A = SETTLED FINE; H = FAIRLY FINE SHOWERY LATER; P = CHANGABLE, SOME RAIN; finishing all the way through the alphabet at Z = STORMY MUCH RAIN. It is surprisingly accurate for the short term 8 hours or so; more reliable than the Met. Office.

Mild nights in February are nearly always deceptive and the toads take a gamble; if they delay spawning then the ditches and puddles they often use may dry-up before the tadpoles have time to mature, too early and they might become frozen solid. The first fling of winter's over but it's certainly not spring yet.