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## TIME, IN ALL HIS TUNEFUL TURNING

Review of:

Mikhail Prishvin 1951. *The Lake and the Woods*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 258 pp. Wood engravings by Brian Hope-Taylor.  
[Sixth in a series of "naturalist-in" books.]

The author is a nature writer, not a researcher, and his book is mainly a series of small observations, not extended studies. One can read this engaging book much as one would a volume of short stories, one chapter at a time, not necessarily in sequence.

*The Lake and the Woods* is about nature in Russia. Nature books on cold-temperate and polar regions tend to focus on two things, landscape and big animals, and this is no exception. The close attention is almost entirely on mammals and birds.

The reason for this is not obscure. Prishvin is a keen hunter and repeatedly describes things seen and heard while in search of game. He is no sentimentalist (something of a rarity among Russians, I believe). In one episode, he carefully stalks a flock of sleeping birds in the forest before dawn and settles down to watch them awaken, a process that he describes in awestruck detail. And then, just as one is sure he is going to steal away in the western manner of a heart melted by nature, *blam!*, he shoots his bird clean through the head. And his view of large predators is distinctly old-fashioned. In particular, he knows no peace with wolves, and the right to kill any wolf is taken for granted.

As seen in the subtitle, *Nature's Calendar*, Prishvin's focus is on the seasons, and most of his observations are bound up with seasonal changes. Many of these are triggered by the first appearances or events in the life of plants and animals as markers in the annual cycle. "Every day I noticed something fresh and characteristic, and taught myself to realize the continual progress of the seasons, which, in their passing, never come back again in precisely the same form." This attention to the cycle of the seasons is a key feature in much temperate-zone nature writing, and it is something that we never quite see in the tropics.



As this is Russia, there is a fair amount of attention to coping with winter, but spring is the season that really brings on the prose and emotion. About half of the book is devoted to spring, the time of year in cold-temperate regions when the world is in a mad rush to become itself again. "It was one of those wonderful days of spring when everything for which we had borne so many gloomy, frosty, windy days began to show itself; and all that had been necessary to create such a day as this."

Summer, too, can be so exciting as to confuse the ardent naturalist: "And one day that summer -- what a day it was! -- there were so many riddles cropping up all at once that I ended by cursing a perfectly innocent old woman."

A rather wonderful part of Prishvin's nature consciousness is his attention to sound, and not just the tweets, warbles and honks of birds. The whole outdoors has its song, as seen in this passage about autumn:

"As it almost always does in our part of the world, the west wind dropped a little before sunset. The rays of the setting sun shone through the branches. I curved my hand behind my ear and through the slight rustle of the aspen leaves I could hear the sound of a leaf being torn away, a sound much louder and sharper than the dull plop of falling water."

One flabbergasting feature of this book merits mention. Prishvin never exactly tells us where all this exploration and observation take place. To be sure, he tells us very early that he was based in the town of Pereslavl on Lake Pleshcheyevo, he names a host of villages, hills and rivers as he goes along, and the book jacket makes plain that we are somewhere in Russia. The trouble is that Pereslavl and all of the other places and landmarks do not loom large on a world scale, and I could not definitely identify any of them in even the big *Times Atlas of the World*. It is rather as if you were to write about nature in the West Indies, with observations drawn from Bush Bush, the Tamana Caves and Aripo Village, but with no explicit mention of Trinidad. However, sifting through the evidence, it seems likely that all of this takes place to the northeast of Moscow, far enough away to be in the wilds, but close enough that a Moscow readership would not require the geographic explanation that we do.

Let me end with a quotation that illustrates Prishvin's close engagement with his subject:

"It is impossible to describe in words the feeling of being in the deep forest at night, when you know that over your head the great birds are sleeping, the last survivors of an age of great creatures. And this sleep was not always peaceful -- now and again one would stir and another preens itself. Not that there was anything terrifying about being alone at night; on the contrary, I was as comfortable as if I were visiting family friends during a holiday. If it had not been so cold and wet I might have slept with the birds."

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