

Edwin Way Teale's Healing Journey of *North with the Spring*

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— Peter Chidester

On the snowy morning of February 14, 1947, Edwin Way Teale and his wife, Nelly Teale, left Baldwin, New York on a journey that would take them and their black Buick 16,903 miles across 23 states. Gathering material for Edwin Way Teale's pivotal 1951 book, *North with the Spring*, the Teales pursued spring from Everglades, Florida to the top of Mt. Washington in New Hampshire. Ostensibly, this project would document the changes that rising temperatures wrought upon the flora and fauna, but at heart this journey was a pilgrimage that the Teales undertook for spiritual renewal and personal growth. Edwin Teale once considered for his book's epigraph these lines from Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days*: "Who knows [. . .] but the pages now ensuing may carry ray of sun or smell of grass or corn or call of bird, or gleam of stars by night [. . .] to denizen of heated cityhouse or tired workman or workwoman?"¹ In the decades preceding this trip, Teale wrote nine books, edited three, endured the Great Depression, declared his professional independence, and experienced unfathomable loss in the death of his only child, David, on the battlefields of WWII Europe. While his vision and voice as a naturalist writer grew, the human world around Edwin Way Teale became more chaotic and absurd, so he turned to nature and literature to lay balm upon his soul. In essence the journey of *North with the Spring* is a Thoreauvian ramble in which the Teales focus their energies on the natural world in order to enact their own spiritual and intellectual rebirth.

North with the Spring marks Teale's effort to attain his full literary potential. At this point in his life, Teale has the artistic control and personal desire necessary to give himself entirely to this first book in his *The American*

¹ "Notes." Edwin Way Teale Papers, box 8, folder 541, U of Connecticut, Storrs

Season series, which will achieve a Pulitzer Prize in its last installment, *Wandering through Winter*. On October 1, 1941, the day that he would celebrate as his personal “Independence Day,” Edwin Way Teale resigned his position as a feature writer at *Popular Science Monthly*.² Teale’s higher ambition was to become a “literary naturalist,” and in his unpublished professional journal, *An Adventure in Making a Living*, Teale expresses the sense of urgency that drove him to independence:

The forties are the slack-water years of life. The tide has ceased running in one direction but it has not begun to flow in the other. Youth is the flood-tide; age the ebb. The forties lie between. Here, then is a time for gambling on ourselves, for making, in the Emersonian sense, the highest investment of all. At 42, while [my] health [is] good, while I am at top in my work at the magazine, while I have the best financial prospects, the time is ripe to dare to live according to the pattern of my mind.³

In 1940 Teale lighted upon the germ of *North with the Spring* when interviewing Dr. John Fogg Jr. of the University of Pennsylvania. Fogg had tracked the northward progress of spring in the U.S. by noting changes in vegetation, confirming that spring moves northward at a rate of between ten and fifteen miles per day and ascends mountain ranges at a rate of one hundred feet per day. Taking Thoreau’s journals as his model, Teale envisioned *North with the Spring* as a present-tense narrative in journal form that would chronicle his observations and activities in following spring north.⁴ Teale planned to refine his journals of this 130-day road trip and present them as his *Walden*.

When Teale wrote *North with the Spring*, he was striving to increase both the content and the quality of his work as a photographer, a writer, and a naturalist. On June 2, 1949, Edwin Way Teale’s 50th birthday, he wrote, “From

² [An Adventure in Making a Living I:5](#)

³ [An Adventure in Making a Living I:4](#)

⁴ “Notes.” Edwin Way Teale Papers, box 8, folder 541

now on I must set the hurdle higher, become less satisfied, more dissatisfied with my work. The first big hurdle of the second half-century [of my life] is *North with the Spring*.”⁵ The writing of *North with the Spring* took two years and nine months.⁶ Teale wrote his first book, *The Book of Gliders* (1930), in ten weeks and wrote the four books that preceded *North with the Spring* in nine months. All of Teale’s earlier books were essentially quite different from *North with the Spring*. The spring book was his first work with a continuous narrative thread. His other works consisted of anecdotal essays and pieces derived from years of “Nature Notes” that Teale had been recording in black notebooks for decades. Furthermore, the early books contained copious photographs. *Days without Time*, the book that preceded *North with the Spring*, contains 144 photographs on 74 of its 283 pages. Because of increased printing costs and a much longer manuscript, *North with the Spring* includes only 35 pictures on 32 of its 358 pages, but its index is more than twice as long as that of any book that preceded it. This is a sad but practical reduction from the original 2,400 pictures that Teale shot during the spring trip. However, this shift in content indicates Teale’s growing skill as a writer.

Central to Edwin Way Teale’s conception of *North with the Spring* was his desire to share his experiences with his loved ones, Nellie and David. Teale was admittedly a shy and retiring man. Explaining his own diffident nature in regard to his preference for “minor melodies,” Teale wrote, “Perhaps this is a reflection of timidity, narrow hopes, a feeling of weakness — of wanting to retire to a corner, a hiding place—my corner is the insect world. Here I am Gulliver.”⁷ Characteristically, on the evening of August 13, 1941, Edwin and Nellie Teale sat together in the grass of his insect garden below an apple tree, the “Lincoln Tree,”

⁵ [An Adventure in Making a Living III:229](#)

⁶ [An Adventure in Making a Living III:187](#)

⁷ [An Adventure in Making a Living III:223](#)

and decided that Edwin would make his destiny as an independent writer.⁸ This scene, as he paints it in his journal, is paradigmatic of the retiring dignity and freedom in which Teale wished to live and work. Becoming a freelance writer allowed him to work in close proximity with the natural world and to keep company with Nellie, David and a close circle of amiable and like-minded colleagues. Buoyed up by this professional environment, he would now be able to explore his vast interests as a writer.

The decade in which *North with the Spring* slowly took shape brought Teale great professional success and immense personal loss. On April 2, 1945, Edwin Way Teale returned from a meeting of the John Burroughs Association to find Nellie holding a letter that declared their son, David, a member of the Tiger Patrol of Patton's Third Army, was missing in action.⁹ The Teales had last seen David during a brief night visit on October 13, 1944, as he passed through New York on his way to deploy for Europe. Months after this letter arrived, they learned that David had been killed on the night of March 15, 1945, during a reconnaissance mission on the Maselle River in the taking of Coblenz, Germany. This was less than two months before V-E Day.¹⁰ From that night, no part of Teale's life was separable from his efforts to cope with losing David.

David's death hurled Edwin Way Teale into a long and dark period of cosmic angst. Teale had a delicate temperament and was always prone to depression. Nellie Teale described her husband, saying, "Well, he was more up and down than I realized. Oh, if things went well he was way up in the air, [. . .] and then if things weren't going too well, way down in the dumps."¹¹ Indeed, Teale's journal writings show that he vacillated between short periods of

⁸ *An Adventure in Making a Living* I (1941):5

⁹ *An Adventure in Making a Living* II:159

¹⁰ *An Adventure in Making a Living* II:177-180

¹¹ Millard C. Davis. "Interview with Nellie Donovan Teale" ts. 4 August 1990, box 230, folder 5375, Edwin Way Teale Papers, U of Connecticut, Storrs

depression brought on by setbacks and elated highs that he experienced in moments of joy. After recording David's missing in action status, Teale, a compulsive writer, did not pen another word until August 8, 1945, a lapse of 132 days. In this first great outpouring after David's death, Teale wrote, "Fate is a bully and cowering before it leads to more sadistic cruelty. [. . .] I prayed with clean sincerity during those weeks when Davy's fate seemed to hang in the balance [. . .]. I prayed then that if David could come back I would endure without complaint the worst that life could bring me—a cancer, my legs cut off—anything. But I was speaking to empty, unheeding space."¹² For that time, Teale came to believe that justice for the individual was a farce created by the human imagination.

On the 14th of August he wrote, "Things hereafter will be divided into two groups—things that David saw or touched or knew about and those he never knew. . . . Music is painful to me; it stirs too vividly my emotions. The popular song I heard with David in high school and at Auburn — "You Are my Sunshine" — will I ever be able to hear it again?"¹³ Teale divided his life and career by this day. Nothing would ever be the same for him, not even music. The joy of spring also seemed lost to Edwin Way Teale when David died in the war. In May of 1946, he wrote, "Another spring is here, but springs will never be the same again. How changed all the world and all its life when the mind behind the eyes is changed."¹⁴ Loss desensitized Teale and the world now seemed degraded and absurd. The disappearance of justice and loss of heart that Teale decried were, in his mind, linked to a spiritual change reflected in every facet of life. In particular, Teale saw literature as an apt barometer for gauging the degeneracy of the times. In April of 1946 he wrote, "Idealism, death for a

¹² [An Adventure in Making a Living II:169](#)

¹³ [An Adventure in Making a Living II:184](#)

¹⁴ [An Adventure in Making a Living II:291](#)

principle, noble sentiments, selfless devotion to a noble cause — these too seem to have been killed and left behind are only the material motives.”

It seems to me that the breakdown of nobility of soul and the greatness of language go hand in hand. Consider the names of the agencies that are supposed to save the world: UNO, UNRAA etc. They sound like the guttural gibberish of a robot age! The dignity of language, the poetry of sound, the great tradition of words of meaning and emotion are gone.¹⁵

However, though spring held no promise for Teale in those days, his career was blossoming.

Despite the loss of David, Edwin Way Teale achieved unprecedented financial success during this time. His publication numbers and income had grown steadily year by year until, in 1946, his income reached \$14,200.21, a figure that astounded him. However, there was dismay for Teale in this success and prosperity accompanied by such tremendous loss. “The more that comes to me,” Teale wrote in June of 1946, “the more bitter is the loss of David — his loss of all that I enjoy. How can it be that a man can at the same time have everything—and nothing?”¹⁶ At a time when Edwin Way Teale was achieving his dreams as a writer, cosmic despair enveloped his life.

Ironically, during these emotionally strained times, the diffident Teale increasingly found himself amidst the “ruling class” and surrounded by their wealth. This made him “sullen and morose,” like “an animal, caught and caged, nervous, ill at ease.” Teale states that he “would rather be a bug in a rotten log than a dilettante living in a 5th Avenue apartment.”¹⁷ Mingling with the elite was to Teale an uncomfortable drain on his time and freedom. When Frank C. Dodd asked Teale to join the exclusive Player’s Club in 1944, Teale declined and wrote in his journal, “I want to be free to jump when the jumping time comes—to live in

¹⁵ [An Adventure in Making a Living II:282](#)

¹⁶ [An Adventure in Making a Living II:15](#)

¹⁷ [An Adventure in Making a Living III:197](#)

the dunes with almost no income in order to write a better book.”¹⁸ It seems that Teale always felt that his destiny as a literary naturalist lay in a free and open environment like the Indiana sand dunes of his youth. Consequently, as time went on, not only was the social environment of New York and Long Island becoming increasingly unsavory for Teale, he was also dismayed by the environmental changes wrought by this booming society.

Exacerbating his social unease, Teale found himself entangled in the growth of the post-WWII building boom. As suburbia consumed Baldwin and the rest of Long Island, Teale found himself with fewer and fewer places of refuge to support his work as a naturalist writer. Dismayed by these changes, Teale lamented, “Wherever I go nowadays, the old is gone overnight. ‘Gone, all are gone, the old familiar faces.’ Woods are leveled. Subdivisions mushroom up in the wake of bulldozers. Here is warfare, devastation—whole woodlands are wiped out as though by an atom bomb.”¹⁹ In 1951 the local school board bulldozed Teale’s insect garden—the setting of his early books and his place of meditation — to build a new school. While writing *North with the Spring* in June of 1950, Teale contemplates this trip and book as an alternative to the highly artificial constructs of society: “[. . .] Ours are simple and modest adventures. In this day of concocted adventure, with spine-tingling episodes following nerve-chilling battles on every radio program, my book may well seem flat and eventless—too quiet a volume for the times. But it — as Montaigne put it — will be ‘an honest book.’ It will stand—not high perhaps—but on the solid base of sincerity and truth. All in it really happened!”²⁰ *North with the Spring*, was to be a “return to the real,” a means to continue living and working in “sincerity and truth.”

¹⁸ [An Adventure in Making a Living I:64](#)

¹⁹ [An Adventure in Making a Living IV:11](#)

²⁰ [An Adventure in Making a Living III:283](#)

For Edwin Way Teale, nobody better exemplified this sort of freedom than Henry David Thoreau. Teale espoused Thoreau's philosophical perspectives and found solace and guidance in his writings. In January of 1950, Teale wrote, "I don't know whether Henry Thoreau was the best man or wisest or most laudable man on earth but he certainly was the man most nearly akin to my likes and feelings." His entry in his journal on January 3, 1853 expresses, better than I have even thought it, my attitude toward man and nature: "I love nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness. If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this."²¹

As a writer, Teale was driven by the desire to seek freedom, and like Thoreau, Teale found this freedom in the natural world. As he states in "Winter," chapter one of *North with the Spring*, the Teales left Baldwin in February of 1947 because "That quiet desperation, which Thoreau says characterizes the mass of men, was taking on new intensity."²² The redemptive freedom that the Teale's sought was not to be found in human society or landscapes that bore the heavy footprint of urban civilization. In his *Journal of North with the Spring*, Teale relates how anticipation of the spring trip helped him and Nellie through the heartache of the contradictory and absurd years of prosperity and accompanying loss: "Luck incredible, so far as freedom and money are concerned, has come with the greater sale of my books. But the pall of sadness of David's death in the war, the destruction of so many of our plans, the seeming uselessness of any endeavor has balanced the score. Through it all,

²¹ *An Adventure in Making a Living* III:269

²² *North with the Spring* (New York: Dodd-Mead, 1951) 1

the trip north with the spring stood out like a beacon to work for.”²³ Perhaps without remaining fully engaged with his work and aspirations as a poet-naturalist Teale could not have endured.

In dealing with his grief, Teale gave himself to his work. For him, having “something worthwhile to do [was] an aid of value almost beyond comprehension.”²⁴ The self-justification and personal satisfaction that Teale gained from writing continually served as his redemption. Work helped him not only to survive, but to reclaim his joy for life. In a journal entry of January 1946, Teale wrote, “I am never-endingly grateful for the gift of work — work that I want to do. Work is the world’s finest and cleanest opiate for sorrow. I remember one morning recently I sat down with the feeling: ‘I would rather be here in this chair, by this desk-lamp, doing this sentence than anywhere else in the world!’”²⁵ As time progressed and he continued to immerse himself in his work, Teale became more and more positive in his journal entries, and plans for *North with Spring* were central to his recovery. This book was the best of the “worthwhile” work that he “wanted to do.”

North with the Spring, which is inscribed

Dedicated to DAVID
Who Travelled with
Us in Our Hearts

is a book for David, a book to reunite the Teales and their son. Among the last matters that the Teales attended to before their trip was to finalize the David Teale Memorial Award, which would send two boys from David’s boy scout troop to summer camp each year. By this time Teale had begun to channel his

²³ *The Journal of North with the Spring* vol.1, part 1, 4

²⁴ *An Adventure in Making a Living* II:198

²⁵ *An Adventure in Making a Living* II:255

memories of David into positive manifestations. In the opening pages of his *Journal of North with the Spring*, Teale writes of David, "But how we want him on this trip! He had planned to make a walking tour down the Atlantic Coast after the war. Such memories are with us always as we make our preparations for the trip we have planned so long and so deeply hoped he could make with us." In the second chapter of *North with the Spring*, Teale writes of spring, "It is the season of youth, of beginning again; the season of blank pages, of unhurried time, of belief and optimism. [. . .] All things seem possible in May."²⁶

Combing through the myriad notes that are contained in the Edwin Way Teale papers, early on I came across scraps of paper with mysterious and often illegible words, phrases and sentences written upon them in fountain pen, pencil and crayon – book ideas, field notes, odd statements such as "Giant Hives!," and many, many to-do lists. Upon one of these lists, I found the entry "get 'You Are my Sunshine' record." Though I had read through hundreds and hundreds of these odd scraps of paper and lists, this quirky and enigmatic glimpse into Teale's mind brought a smile to my face. Weeks later, I came across his August 14, 1944 entry in *An Adventure in Making a Living* that I quoted above, the one in which Teale declares that the events of his life will now be divided into those with David and those without him. In this entry, Teale laments that he can no longer listen to music because it is too painful for him, particularly, "You Are my Sunshine," which he associated with David. At some point music became positive again and buying this record became important. But when did this occur? The to-do list that I had run across gave no date, but one of the items on it was, "Next year Richard Jefferies centenary-article." English naturalist Richard Jefferies was born in 1848. Teale's list must have been written in 1947, after the trip. That year music was again accessible to Teale, even a piece so emotionally tied to David. In that year, one in which Edwin and Nellie Teale spent 130 days

²⁶ [North with the Spring 14](#)

following spring, a trip and work dedicated to David, somehow the sadness had changed.

As Teale was in the middle of writing the revised chapters of *North with the Spring* in May of 1951, he made this entry in his journal:

Without music, something of the hardness of life enters our hearts. For years after David was lost music was too much for me to hear. It opened the armor and let the furies rush in. It stirred emotions beyond enduring. And during those years something hardened inside. [. . .] Only now am I beginning to find the rest and elevation in music I once enjoyed. I am softened inside without collapsing. We can be softened so much, no more, and still endure in such a world as we are born into on this earth.²⁷

Teale had immense hopes invested in *North with the Spring* and dedicated himself to the work as he had never done with any previous project. Teale wrote, “No other book of mine required so much preparation or so long and so hard labor to produce.”²⁸ However, this epic literary journey sustained Edwin and Nelly Teale, and they persevered. Shortly after Teale declared that music had returned to his life, he wrote this brief note in his journal: “How many times I dream of David, dream — that he is lost in a crowd in a city or a store as a little boy and I am hunting him.”²⁹ This entry brings to mind these lines from “Your Are my Sunshine”:

The other night dear, as I lay sleeping,
I dreamt I held you in my arms.
When I awoke dear, I was mistaken,

²⁷ [An Adventure in Making a Living IV:64-65](#)

²⁸ [An Adventure in Making a Living IV:300](#)

²⁹ [An Adventure in Making a Living IV:66](#)

So I hung my head down and cried.

Though the sadness did not ever leave Edwin and Nelly Teale, spring did return.