

CHARLES MOORE

# The murky 21st-century tale of Tomm Brock and Mr Grant

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*Fanatical resistance to the badger cull by the RSPCA and its boss is very dangerous, says **Charles Moore***

The badger cull has some sound scientific foundation (PA)

“I HAVE made many books about well behaved people. Now, for a change, I am going to make a story about two disagreeable people, called Tommy Brock and Mr Tod.” These are the opening words of Beatrix Potter’s novel *The Tale of Mr Tod*. Perhaps you can imagine how they gladdened the heart of a country boy (me), who felt he had read rather too many uneventful stories about rural life, and was in search of stronger stuff. This is Potter’s boldest work.

Tommy Brock, of course, is a badger. He is “not nice in his habits”. He takes advantage of credulous old Mr Bouncer (a rabbit), and steals a sackful of baby rabbits to eat. Then he breaks and enters the squalid home of Mr Tod (a fox), puts the sack of babies in the unlit oven for later, and falls asleep in Mr Tod’s bed. When Mr Tod returns and discovers this outrage, he and Tommy Brock become locked in such a violent fight that Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny are able to sneak in unnoticed, rescue the young’uns and drag them home to safety.

Though rightly not immune to Tommy Brock’s charm – he is “a short, bristly person with a grin” – Beatrix Potter has his character about right. His clothes are very dirty. He eats other creatures voraciously. He destroys habitat (“waddling about at night digging things up”), and he is capable of ferocious violence. One of my most vivid memories is a Kent farmer’s description of the screams from a hedgehog which was being eviscerated alive by a badger in his barn.

But Beatrix Potter was writing at a time when badger problems – also including undermining arable land and killing young lambs – were kept in balance. Tommy Brock and his kin were not a protected species. Nowadays, they are. As a result, there are far more of them, perhaps

300,000 in England.

If you have greatly increased numbers of a wild animal which has no natural predators, this creates problems for other animals, both wild and domestic. The rise of badgers is nice in itself, but it has led to the decline of hedgehogs, ground-nesting birds and bumblebees.

The problem of TB in cattle is more serious still. Infected badgers are unpleasingly known as “super-excretors”, and TB is in their urine and faeces. The number of new bovine TB cases is doubling every nine years. Last year, 34,000 cattle had to be slaughtered. When a herd is infected, no cattle in it can be sold (except for slaughter), so the farm is quickly overstocked and the whole herd is, in effect, shut down. This is hugely expensive for the Government in compensation, horrible for the farmers and, of course, for the cattle. It isn't great for the badgers themselves. I have talked to people who have seen the ravages of TB on their corpses. Without control of TB, the EU – always keen, despite its tragic-comic Nobel Peace Prize, to make war on British agriculture – will gear itself up to declare British milk unsafe.

So the Coalition, in the robust forms of the new Defra Secretary Owen Paterson and his Liberal Democrat number two David Heath, is pushing ahead with experimental culls in the West Country. Soon, under NFU guidance, badgers in these areas will be shot at night. The idea is not to exterminate, but to control. A few hundred will die in these trials: 50,000 are killed on the roads each year.

Why should any of this excite much passion? Obviously, it is important for farmers, and for British consumers, to have clean dairy herds. Obviously, for all of us who care about wild animals, it is important to have a reasonably sized badger population (and a healthy one). Equally obviously – you would have thought – these aims can be reconciled. This has happened successfully with the culling, for the same reason, of white-tailed deer in Michigan and possums (where TB incidence fell from 1,700 herds of cattle to fewer than 100) in New Zealand. There are scientific disagreements about the methods of culling. Some say that vaccination can work, others that we are not nearly there yet. But surely such debates can be resolved by the interested parties, just as we, the public, broadly speaking trust those who supply our water, say, to get it right.

But if you think that, you do not understand the weird state of some

sections of current British moral culture. The concept of life itself has warped. People who go white with rage at the idea of any restriction on the abortion of human foetuses get even more beside themselves at any killing of wild animals by human beings.

Outside the Conservative Party conference 30 years ago, protesters used to call for more jobs for people. This week, they were there to defend the life of one type of wild animal (the badger), regardless of its effects upon the life of other animals, human beings, or, indeed, the species itself. The culling of badgers is a form of control, not of pleasure, but the Hunt Saboteurs Association and the League Against Cruel Sports lead with it on their websites. I have seen it described on activists' blogs as "a stealth blood-sport". Already there are death threats to ministers, and the farmers in the areas concerned are being intimidated.

I won't be surprised if the sabs try to turn the culls into the animal equivalent of the Wapping print union dispute of the 1980s. I hope the Government won't be surprised either, and will be as firm in upholding the law as it was then.

Yesterday it was reported that the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has written to farmers who are part of its Freedom Food assurance scheme warning them that, if they take part in the cull, they will be expelled from the programme. The RSPCA says that it is "unacceptable to use lethal methods of wild animal control as routine practice". So that means that rats cannot be poisoned, foxes, rabbits or carrion shot, a rule which would pretty much destroy profitable farming. Gavin Grant, the former Liberal Democrat activist who is the RSPCA's new chief executive, is also calling for the boycott of milk produced by farms where the cull has happened, which he describes as "soaked in badgers' blood". He ignores the fact that a large proportion of milk sold in this country is from Ireland, where culls have been extensive.

The Countryside Alliance points out that this is "naked politics". Is a charity free to try to undermine legal livelihoods and penalise people who take part in a scientifically approved, government-run scheme? It would be interesting to be told more about the funding of the RSPCA. In recent years, as it has become ever more political, its income from legacies of benevolent old ladies has fallen. Its membership has dropped from 38,600 in 2004 to 25,500 today.

Do a few fanatical animal rights donors keep it on the road? How carefully does it comply with its charitable purpose? Now that the Government has at last replaced the Left-wing Dame Suzi Leather with William Shawcross as chairman of the Charity Commission, it would be good to investigate this murky 21st-century Tale of Tommy Brock and Mr Grant.

There is a big point here. It is getting harder to feed the world. Without productive modern agriculture we shall starve. This makes it more important than ever to work out what really is cruel to animals and what isn't. We must not be dictated to by people who prefer disease in all animals to killing some for the good of the rest. That is a morality which talks about life, but is actually, for human and animal society, a death wish.