

The Second Meadow, Monday Radio 4

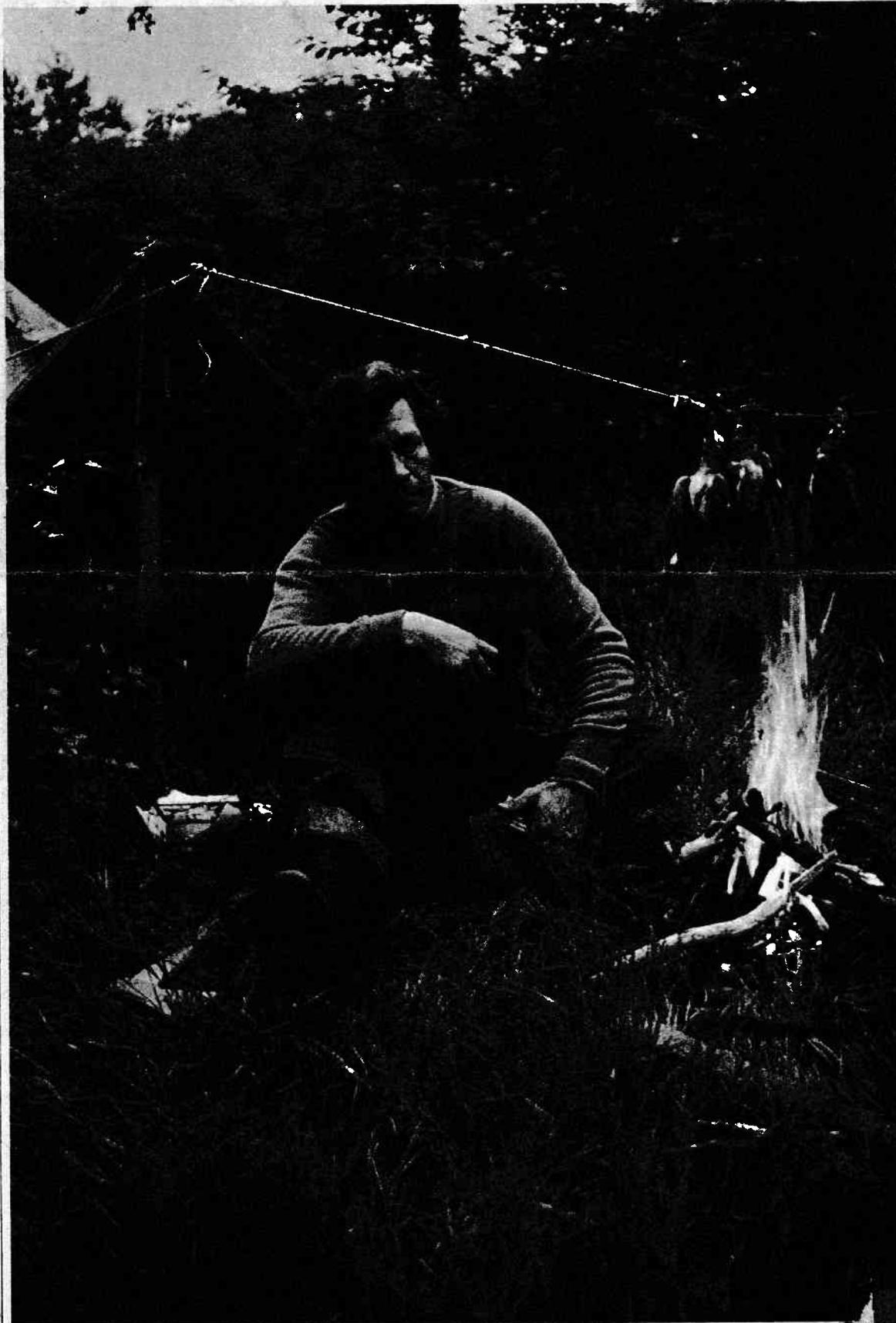
In May's programme Archie Hill, writer and novelist, recreates a time he spent quite alone – except for a box of matches and a rifle – in the depths of the countryside. Boredom arrived in the third week; but he survived boredom, as he has survived much worse in his life. In fact, he found contentment. Jonathan Raban heard from him about the derelict depths of his past, his hopes for the future

Plain tale from Mr Hill

One's first impression when one meets Archie Hill is of a 14-year-old who has been in a roughhouse too many. There's a bobbishness about him, a schoolboy humour, a predilection for taking potshots out of windows with his air-guns. The scar over his lip and the slightly indirect route which his nose takes in its journey down his face look like battle honours won by a member of William's gang in the war against the Hubert Laneites. In fact, Hill is 51, and though much of his life has been a truant one, it has been frighteningly un-Williamish.

After a Black Country childhood of almost unredeemed bloodiness, he went through service in the RAF in the Middle East, where he became a drunk; he got a job as a police constable, and was dismissed the force for being incapably tight on duty; he was incarcerated in mental hospitals and was given electric-shock 'therapy'; he did a two-year spell in jail; and he struck rock-bottom when he landed up as a meths drinker under the arches. If, to begin with, society was not kind to Archie Hill, Hill was even unkind to himself; he has been one of the maestros of the art of self-destruction, a determined suicide who tried to finish himself off in slower and more gruesome ways than any of society's executioners have ever contemplated.

The morning I met him, he'd just shot two pigeons. Yet, when we walked into the lane, he was troubled at the discovery of a dead fledgling at the side of the road. That small paradox offers an important clue. For there has always been a fledgling innocence in Archie Hill which even he couldn't destroy. It shows in his life and in his writing. When, years ago, he decided to give up drinking, he began to nurse the fledgling in himself ➤➤➤ 10



Archie Hill . . . when he takes off with his tent he steps outside society, as nearly free as a man can

← and he now takes a just pride in the sturdy bird it has grown into. Archie Hill was taught to think of himself as worthless. His parents told him so - and so did his teachers, his jailers, his psychiatrists . . . even his fellow-winners told him he was rubbish. He has proved them all gloriously wrong, and he has earned his right to crow.

Hill is not a modest man, at least not in the conventional sense. Almost as soon as you meet him, you hear of his triumphs: he'll tell you how many copies he expects his new book to sell in the United States, and how big an advance he's going to demand on his next one. The first thing he showed me was a glowing review (in a trade paper for publicans) of the reissue of his autobiography, *A Cage of Shadows*. Indeed, he has a better memory for his good reviews than any writer I've met. 'Have you read what Tony Parker wrote? "Archie Hill has never learned to 'write'; and I hope to God he never does. Mr Hill takes the English language and batters it into submission." I was pleased with that. Very pleased. I think that's good, don't you?' He'll tell you how he once put down Lord Longford ('I told him he was having a love affair with God at an emotional level. That stumped him.'), and how he scored off the BBC Accounts Department when they were rather slow in coughing up a fee for one of his broadcasts.

'I got straight back on the phone to Portland Place. "Hill here," I said. "I want to speak to Curran." They put me through right away, and there's Curran on the end of the phone. "Lord Hill?" he says. "No, Archie Hill, and I want my money." There was this long pause, and then he said, "Well, I suppose we'd better talk about it, hadn't we . . ." Next day, I got my cheque.'

When he read in the paper that a senior official in the Home Office, who'd told Hill that he'd always be a second-class citizen since he was an ex-convict, had suffered a heart attack, Archie Hill sent him a telegram at the hospital: CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR HEART



Archie Hill . . . lighting out for emptier places, lighting up his pipe

ATTACK STOP I DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD ONE.

He shows you his pipe, a nice curly briar, given to him by Jack de Manio after an appearance on *Jack de Manio Precisely*. He tells you how Lord Willis, speaking at a literary lunch at which both Hill and Willis were guests, devoted the first ten minutes of his speech to praising Archie Hill's writing. In anyone else's mouth, these would sound like a catalogue of tiresome boasts, but with Hill one is able to share his infectiously innocent pleasure in his own achievements. His work, his growing fame, his cheerful hobnobbing with Establishment names add up to an enormous V-sign in the face of a society which did its best to kick him down and keep his face well-trodden into the dirt.

And he is still safely sceptical of society and its blandishments. 'A prison is a micro-society. It's all there - the screws, the trustees, the barons . . . it's just society in miniature; and it's only when you're in prison that you realise how

big a prison outside society is.' He was delighted to discover that the origin of the word 'freedom' was the Norman custom of allowing a prisoner to choose the manner of his execution (or 'free-doom'). He still thinks of himself as a prisoner, except that now he lives behind bars of his own design - a sticky cobweb of deadlines, contracts, invitations to speak (mostly on alcoholism), and more projects than an ordinary man would think it possible to finish in a lifetime.

He can't read a note of music, but he's composing a symphony. He plays it by ear on a Hammond organ, taping it as he goes, and he'll hire a professional musician to transcribe it when he's finished. He is making his own films. He means to get down to painting seriously soon, too. And he has 'about 20' more books in his head which he wants to get written. He is passionately greedy for experience. Conversation with him is like being half-drowned in a river in flood. Names and topics fly past too

quickly to grab hold of: Plato, Christ, poaching, Ficino, the best make of airgun, Klaus Fuchs (the atom spy, whom Hill met in jail and who was his chief intellectual mentor), Beethoven, the landlord of the local pub (a famous wit) . . .

His prose style has the same haste and rapacity. It's like a poacher's net, thrown out to catch as much as it can of experience on the wing. Every paragraph bulges with perceptions, some of them obvious, some gleamingly new. More than anything else, Hill's writing communicates his enormous excitement in just looking at, smelling, listening to and thinking about the world he lives in. If he's notably immodest about society, he makes up for it by being humble before life. Reading him or hearing him talk, you quickly catch that deeper modesty, an invincible capacity for wonder.

He now lives with his family in a house in Hertfordshire - a house of ties, responsibilities and telephone messages. Every so often he feels the need to light out for emptier places. Last year he camped alone on the edge of Worcestershire for six weeks; when I went to see him he had pitched his tent just outside the Norfolk village of Stalham. Stalham is hardly one of the wildest parts of the world. Hill woke in the small hours to howling peacocks. Where holidaymakers cruise round the countryside in sun-hats and shades, Hill had found himself a small, unlikely square of wilderness, between a cattle trough and a spinney full of buttercups.

He knows more than most people about what it means to be unfree; and when he takes off with his tent, to mooch and think, he steps outside society, as nearly free as a man can be. With a gun, a storm lantern, a bar of soap and a notebook, he really is like a boy - determined to keep those shades of the prison house from closing in on him again. *The Second Meadow* is about that experience, and prisoners everywhere (especially the millions of us who haven't even realised that we are prisoners) have a lot to learn from Archie Hill.