

Text © Peter Ryan, 2021
Typographical design © David Bateman Ltd, 2021
Published in 2021 by David Bateman Ltd
2/5 Workspace Drive, Hobsonville, Auckland 0618, New Zealand
www.batemanbooks.co.nz
ISBN 978-1-98-853872-3

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Front cover image: Paul Bride

Back cover image: Jo Vagaan

Interior photography by Peter Ryan, unless otherwise credited to the respective artists and photographers listed on pages 238–240.

Book design: Nick Turzynski, redinc., Auckland

Printed in China through Colorcraft Ltd, Hong Kong

For Mark Haldane, Ivan, Dan and the team

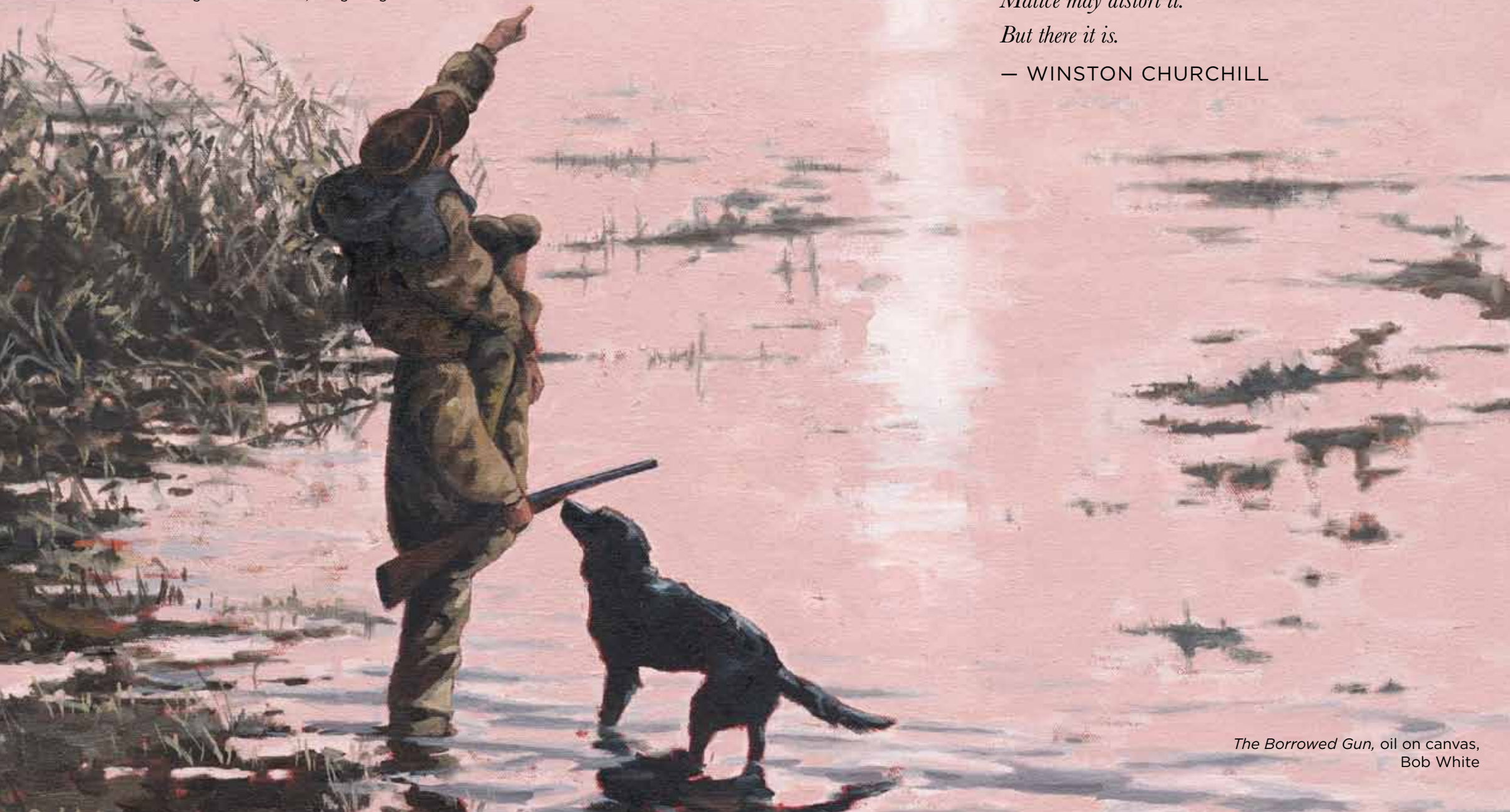
Truth is incontrovertible.

Panic may resent it. Ignorance may deride it.

Malice may distort it.

But there it is.

— WINSTON CHURCHILL



The Borrowed Gun, oil on canvas,
Bob White

The Year Turns – Part I

THIS WON'T MAKE MUCH SENSE to my friends above the Equator. You have your own vibe for the months and seasons, and even directions. For you the north is the great cold, the south a place of sunny warmth. Down Under, here below the line, we work to a different beat.

For us spring starts to stir at the close of August. Where I live whitebait are something of a legend, maybe because they come at the worst of that hungry gap, when winter's stores are gone and the bounty of summer is yet to come. That would have been a big deal back in the day. The tiny fish come up the river from the sea in schools, and if you're lucky you score a few pounds. In the wake of the prey, as always, come the predators. This is when the bright sea-run trout follow the bait and gorge on a seasonal treat.

This is the time of the Silver Rabbits and Grey Ghosts, and all the flies that look like whitebait. It's when mallard drakes chase the hens across the sky, when pairs cosy up in puddles after rain, when the first down-lined nests appear in deep cover.

September and October are when the cock Californians call from a post or a tree to make more quail. It's the time of apple blossom and the late frosts that can wipe out an early vegetable garden. It's when the mother hares follow a regular beat to their hidden leveret for a daily suckle, leaving their tracks in the long, wet grass. And, most pleurably, it's when the cock pheasants start to crow from cover. The world talks to us in spring: the game is moving fast now, keep up.

Summer is the time of the garden and the fishing rod, when you can fill a basket with corn and strawberries and crisp beans in minutes. I hunt very little now in the summer. It's legal here in New Zealand as our game species are introduced, but there are reasons not to. For me there are too many flies and it's easy to watch your meat spoil. Over the summer most female deer,



Fallow backstrap, seared to rare. Simple things.

tahr and chamois will have a youngster at foot, and that's not something I want to mess with, legal or not. It's spikers or barren old females or nothing. New Zealand has almost no rules around big-game hunting, making it the last frontier for ethics.

February is summer at its end, and when the pigeons come to endless fields of wheat and barley, soft and gold in the evening haze. Then autumn begins to mock what summer has made. As April's first frost falls, it's the natural time to take what will not, what cannot, last the winter. Time to put things up, as they used to say.

This is the time of rabbits jointed and braised long and slow with baby onions and peppercorns and olives. This is the rut when venison comes in many shades, from casserole steak to fallow tenderloins crusted in rosemary and thyme and seared to rare, served with good bread and a cheeky red. It's the time of salami, rich with garlic, herbs and red wine. I get my own meat, of course, but a mate brings his professional skills to the casing and smoking in return for some venison now that he's too old to hit the hills. The black economy still flies here. Now to let those little beauties hang and mellow out. Winter, do your worst. Or wurst.



Char-grilled quail in thyme, olive oil and lemon.

It's the time of wild pigs coming out of the scrub blocks and onto cultivation. One minute you're grubbing up crops, and the next thing it's all garlic and rosemary and cider and sage and — long story short — you're sausages. Oh well, circle of life.

And of course it's the time for ducks and geese. You know from watching their nests how many young they have, and that the world can't take them all. These are high-turnover species. Time to smoke that breast meat, sliced finely and served with a sturdy red, or flash-fried with orange juice and brandy. Time to confit those legs in duck fat for the cold to come. And the little quail, sweetest of them all, butterflied in olive oil and lemon juice, and thyme from the hills they lived in, barbecued over charcoal.

June and we're in winter. There's snow in the air from the high country. The big sleep is upon the world, and all we crave in the cold rain is a fire and something to feed our hunger. This is the time when people see what we have made and want to join us. This is the time we have worked so hard for.

And soon it will be spring again.



Welcome Home

THERE ARE CERTAIN PHRASES that roll out so easily they deserve a mandatory cooling-off period. 'Hold my beer — watch this' is a hardy perennial, along with 'just give it a thump' and 'it's not that deep'. If you've ever been rash enough to let slip with 'you're just like your mother', you'll understand. Some things should be given time to mature before they're allowed out.

'We should get a puppy' can go either way. It might be the sloppy start to a careless relationship, as anyone who has walked the cell blocks of the local pound can tell you. Talk about a boulevard of broken dreams. Or it can be something so good it will mark you forever.

I generally enjoy my dogs one at a time, so the decision only comes up rarely. When it does, there's time to savour it — the research, the yarns with mates, casting a critical eye over sires and dams. It's not obsessing over detail, just a simple problem: I can't afford a no-hoper. But Mrs R finds it hilarious. She told me once that popes have been elected with less rigmarole than me choosing a gun dog ...