

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12916-9 - Change and Tradition in Rural England: An Anthology of Writings on Country Life

Edited by Denys Thompson

Excerpt

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This book illustrates the mainstream of English writing on the country from the time of Cobbett to about the middle of the present century. The authors represented (apart from Jefferies) are mostly concerned with the people working in it rather than with the beauty of the landscape; and what they say has implications for us and our problems in the 1980s. It is in no way an exercise in nostalgia. However often he looked back, Cobbett aimed at improving the lot of the labourer; Hardy knew that there was no return, since he wrote to preserve for his own satisfaction 'a fairly true record of a vanishing life' (General Preface to *Novels and Poems* (1912)); and Jefferies declared in *Round About a Great Estate* (1880) 'My sympathies and hopes are with the light of the future, only I should like it to come from nature. The clock should be read by the sunshine, not the sun timed by the clock.' And Sturt, the greatest of writers, other than novelists, on the country, was explicit: 'The more I examine it, the more I grow sceptical of the well-being of the people, in these "good old times"' (*Journals*, p. 622). His main concern was for the future, to enable people to become something better than peasants.

It did not take long for England to become an industrial rather than an agricultural country; and only in living memory has agriculture itself become a branch of industry. Adrian Bell writes in a letter: 'I find it almost impossible to believe that the yet living *Me* went to farm in Suffolk in a parish which *had not in it a single power-driven machine* but one old steam engine. And a windmill

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turned busily in real business in the ever-blowing winds of high Suffolk.' The change to a fully industrial society has affected the lives, aspirations and expectations of us all; it shapes our terms of reference. The farm worker has psychologically long been a town bird, as Lawrence observed years ago, and the land itself is too often an extension of the processing factory. Plants are raw material for packaging or freezing, animals are machines to be minded before they are fed on to the conveyor belt.

Ever since Plato proposed that the ideal community would be a city of specialists, writers have contrasted town with country life. The Greeks had no real cities, but the Romans had, and when their cities became noisy and dirty and centres of crime they satirised them and extolled the rural way of living. The Roman complaints were echoed by English authors. Smollett in *Humphry Clinker* (1770) wrote about London as an overgrown dropsical monster; Johnson established himself by a version of Juvenal on the horrors of metropolitan life. The line has continued with the records by Mayhew, Dickens, Jack London and others of what they found in the capital; and Jefferies in his compelling *After London* (1885) forecast its utter ruin and the un-idyllic restarting of civilisation in the wild. However the town-country antinomy does not open up a helpful approach or enable us to decide which of the many volumes on rural life have something to say to us in the 1980s.

For the purposes of this book – to see if our rural past can assist with our problems – the writers who matter are those who have noted the impact on people of enclosures and the industrial revolution. The final wave of enclosures early last century coincided with the growth of industry, without causal connection; but both factory owner and enclosing squire were profiteers who ill-treated those whose work produced the profits. The townsman Blake in 'London' exposed the cruelty that came with the strengthening of the cash nexus, and he took for granted the primacy of agriculture:

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The sword sung on the barren heath,  
 The sickle in the fruitful field:  
 The sword he sung a song of death,  
 But could not make the sickle yield.

Later, in the prophetic *Vala* (Night the Seventh) he execrates the destruction of the old order and the replacement of the 'arts of life' by the rhythm of the machine; and seems to foretell that war is inherent in technological progress:

Then left the sons of Urizen the plow and harrow, the loom,  
 The hammer and the chisel and the rule and compasses.  
 They forg'd the sword, the chariot of war, the battle ax,  
 The trumpet fitted to the battle and the flute of summer,  
 And all the arts of life they chang'd into the arts of death.  
 The hour glass contemn'd because its simple workmanship  
 Was the workmanship of the plowman, and the water wheel  
 That raises water into cisterns, broken and burn'd in fire  
 Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the  
 shepherd,  
 And in their stead intricate wheels invented, wheel without wheel,  
 To perplex youth in their outgoings and to bind to labours  
 Of day and night the myriads of Etermity, that they might file  
 And polish brass and iron hour after hour, laborious workmanship,  
 Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend the days of wisdom  
 In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread,  
 In ignorance to view a small portion and think that All. . . .

While Blake was writing others were noting the results of enclosures. In the 1780s John Byng, later Lord Torrington, wrote in his diary: 'As a sportsman I hate enclosures, and as a citizen I look on them as the greedy tyrannies of the wealthy few, to oppress the indigent many, and an iniquitous purchase of invaluable rights.' In 1800 Arthur Young,<sup>1</sup> an ardent believer in improving agriculture, admitted that the enclosure of 'waste' land, however

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productive it might be, deprived the poor of their stake in the land and turned peasants into paupers: 'The poor look to facts, not meanings; and the fact is, that by nineteen enclosure bills in twenty they are injured, in some cases grossly injured.' In a letter of 1802, seeking the interest of Charles James Fox in his poems, Wordsworth deplored the decline of the 'estatesmen', the small hereditary landowners of the Lake District, and noted that 'by the spread of manufactures through every part of the country . . . the bonds of domestic feeling among the poor have been weakened, and in innumerable cases entirely destroyed'. Further, in Book VIII of *The Excursion* he described the 'outrage done to nature' – the destruction of the organic relation of man to man, the imposition of the inhuman rhythm of the factory system, the miserable slums for near-serfs and the plight of the victims. He showed too how families were broken up by the labour of children and women, and by the treatment of men as machines.

For all their differences, Young, Wordsworth and Cobbett agreed that every labourer should have a stake in the land. Cobbett in particular spelled this out; what he wanted was a nation of small farmers or cottagers, with allotments and common rights, and to help them he wrote various handbooks of practical advice. He detested a wide range of human types and institutions; he could be inconsistent, sometimes with a bullying manner – but his instincts were sound. He recorded the worsening lot of ordinary men and women in a lively prose, never far removed from vigorous speech. He had an eye for a beautiful landscape when the beauty was an effect of good agriculture. However much we may dislike some of his prejudices, we have to recognise that a page or two of his is worth more than all the works of the political economists of his day.

Progress – the advance of industry and the decline of agriculture as a way of life – continued without check; and on Cobbett's death in 1835 there was none to continue his fight. Richard Jefferies (1848–87) was an exquisite observer of nature, but he did

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not quickly overcome the limitations of his background and his start as a Tory journalist. In Edward Thomas's words, 'He does not dwell on the possibility that there is something deeply wrong . . . when the land is left idle and only the men who could till it suffer' (*Life of Richard Jefferies*, p. 15). He attacked labourers for their 'communism', and he was completely uncritical of such activities as coursing and the poisoning of magpies, revealing his 'callousness and his careless acceptance of things as they are'. Not till he himself was racked by pain and poverty did he write with full sympathy for the people who dwelt in the country he described so beautifully. Though peerless as a recorder of the English scene at its most lovely, he did not see what was happening.

George Sturt (1863–1927) continued the purposeful observing of Cobbett. Much more of a thinker than his predecessor, he came in the end to respect him, after an initial dislike. Sturt had literary ambitions and corresponded a good deal with Arnold Bennett, but in 1884 he had to take over the family wheelwright's shop. Though it gave him wonderful material, the business was uncongenial, and eventually he was able to give it up and pursue his main interest in writing. He completed novels and a book on aesthetics, but it is his half-dozen books on rural life and industry, given unity and direction by his *Journals*, that establish him as a writer to be taken very seriously. His distinction lay in his ability to see a main current in a number of small changes.

In *The Bettesworth Book* (1901) Sturt described the working of the folk mind in, and the variety of skills exercised by, the man he employed, a variety that suggested that there was no such thing as an unskilled agricultural labourer. (This and other books up to and including *Change in the Village* were published under the pen-name of George Bourne.) In *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer* (1907) he presented a full picture of the same man. Dragged up as an orphan, he had started life without advantages, and by modern standards he always appeared dirty: yet he displayed great good sense, a receptive mind, dignity and cheerfulness, together

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with a never-failing gift of expression. Tradition and religion had offered him little, yet Sturt was able to describe him thus, in his old age:

Alone, of his own inborn instinct for being a decent man, he strove through all his life, not to be rich, but to live upright and unashamed. Fumbling, tiresome, garrulous, unprofitable, lean and grim and dirty in outward appearance, the grey old life was full of fight for its idea of being a man; full of fight and patience and stubborn resolve not to give in to anything which it had learnt to regard as weakness . . . think of the patient, resolute spirit, which had almost never indulged its weaknesses, but had its self-respect, its half-savage instincts towards righteousness, its smothered tastes, its untold affections and its tenderness.

Bettesworth was not a peasant, but his recollections were evidence of a vanished peasant economy. This is the subject of *Change in the Village*, Sturt's next and, after the *Journals*, his most important book.

Sturt was always realistic about the peasant way of life. The village he wrote about, originally settled by squatters, was turning into a suburb. It had its seamy side, with squalid and brutal features; it did not lack vice and tragedy. But enough of an older order was left to show that there had once been a civilisation that gave coherence to life, and that despite harshness and poverty the daily round had been varied and interesting, providing scope for men to be men and to live while earning a living. By pointing the contrast with the industrial system, Sturt identified problems that have been rediscovered by writers on the failure of the work-for-leisure formula to afford satisfaction – the extent for example to which the fragmentation of work disorganises the rest of life and makes talk of 'job enrichment' sound futile. In *The Wheelwright's Shop* (1923) he wrote sensitively and powerfully of a traditional craft that met the needs of a neighbourhood. He described the demands it made, not only for high standards of workmanship, technical knowledge and experience of materials but also for familiarity with the district, the soil on which the timber grew, the type of farm a waggon would be supplied to, and the men

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involved. The work itself was interesting, requiring men to use their resources, and rewarding them with a sense of belonging to a guiding tradition, of co-operating with materials, of seeing something beautiful coming out of necessity. They worked in a non-competitive ethos. Finally Sturt noted the changes that came when the car began to supplant the waggon, skill yielded to machinery, the self-supporting workman became a wage-earning hand, and an autonomous community was devoured by a large-scale economy. His observation, 'That civilisation may flourish a less-civilised working-class must work', has been rephrased but neither faced nor answered.

Given better health Sturt would have written books on politics, art, folk culture, and perhaps literature. This is clear from his *Journals* (in the excellent selection by E. D. Mackerness), many pages of which amount to substantial essays. A socialist, he expected little of socialists: 'If they could attain their ends, they would find that as yet we are a people unfit for the improved order; that while learning to manage a State, men had not yet learned how to live.' It is difficult to see the makings of a politician in other equally prescient pages, such as that on the abuse of the world's resources: 'Civilisation has gone astray: instead of finding out How to Live, we have gone on pillaging – pillaging the earth's stores with violence, when we should be getting into close personal intimacy of friendship with her ways . . . England gets wealth and luxuries, but no happiness. We are too greedy to live well.' The same intelligence might have made him a good literary critic, and it certainly accounts for the sanity – especially in his day – of his views on current topics. He was refreshingly forthright on the glamour of war, noise and other aspects of progress, 'that abstraction' the State, and the armed forces – 'those disastrous burdens'. Thus one attends all the more closely to his main pre-occupations, such as the relevance of the past to the present.

Flora Thompson (*Lark Rise to Candleford*) is another in whose writing people are at the centre, and like Sturt she wrote about

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what she knew from within. Covering similar ground at the same time in a different county, her book leaves one with markedly the same impression as *Change in the Village*. A peasantry with rights in the land had become a class of wage-earners, which though robbed of its holding still retained habits of thought and behaviour that were part of the peasant culture. Introducing her book, H. J. Massingham stresses that she records the end

of a self-sufficient country England living by the land, cultivating it by husbandry and associating liberty with the small property. It was not poverty that broke it – that was a secondary cause. It was not even imported cheap and foodless foods. It was that the Industrial Revolution and the Enclosures between them demolished the structure and the pattern of country life . . . now we plough and sow an empty land.

Though the English tradition of writing about the country may be said to have developed strongly in the eighteenth century, the contributors to it do not greatly concern us. There were the landscape poets, such as James Thomson (1700–48) with his popular *The Seasons* and Wordsworth in his earliest phase. Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770) is a most moving poem, but the village that is cleared by a wealthy owner is probably in Ireland. Gilbert White (1720–93) with his life-long study of natural history stands at the head of a long line of prose writers, but he had little time to take note of human beings. It was with Mary Russell Mitford that the cult of the village, now so flourishing, began; *Our Village* (1824) consists of sketches in which clichés abound and all is idealised. Characteristically, after allowing the Harvest Home to be 'a pleasant noise', she adds 'though for one's ears' sake, one makes some haste to get away from it'. This comment contrasts sharply with George Eliot's (1819–80) account in Ch. 53 of *Adam Bede*, and the response of Adam, to whom the distant chant was 'a sacred song'; 'It's wonderful how that sound goes to one's heart almost like a funeral bell, for all it tells one o' the joyfulest time of the year, and the time when men are mostly the thankfulest.' Her description of Adam as representative of pre-industrial civilisation



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vividly evokes the nature of that order: 'He was not an average man. Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our peasant artisans – with an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry, and an inheritance of faculties trained in skilful courageous labour.' The whole of the passage at the end of Ch. 19 is worth looking up.

Two other great novelists had their roots in the country. Jane Austen's (1775–1817) moral outlook is based on a rural custom of good husbandry: Squire Knightley in *Emma* for example is a farmer developing his inheritance of responsibility; *Mansfield Park* shows us a conflict between rural and urban values; and so on. Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) did not publish till after George Eliot's best work had appeared; and by his time the decay of 'a vanishing life' was clear and irremediable. In the preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd* he noted, as one of the results of supplanting stationary cottagers by migratory labourers, the break of continuity that was fatal to the development of qualities depending on attachment to the soil. Like Wordsworth too he deplored the disappearance of the old copyholders who were ousted from their little plots when the system of leasing large farms grew general. He described how the husbandman had the interest of long personal association with his farm. 'The fields were those he had ploughed and sowed from boyhood, and it was impossible for him, in such cases, to sink altogether the character of natural guardian in that of hireling' (*Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings* (1967), pp. 172, 181). He was explicit about features of the life he wanted to record: the Dorset language, for instance, with its 'delicate ability to express the doings, joys and jests, troubles, sorrows, needs, sickness of life in the rural world' (*ibid.*, p. 79). Especially in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders* he records some qualities of the farming life in people who were dedicated to their work in the natural, the agricultural, order of things.

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Characteristic figures in that order are described below by W. H. Hudson (1841–1922) and more recent authors. General accounts have been given by writers such as Cecil Torr (1857–1928), a quiet country gentleman of good education, whose observations add up to a valuable local history. Augustus Jessop deserves a mention in that his *Before the Great Pillage* (1901) reminds us that it was the people at large who built and furnished the churches with the work of mainly local craftsmen, and that the plundering of the parish gilds in the reign of Edward VI was the robbing of the poor by the rich. Two works ahead of their time in diagnosing the terminal illness of rural England were D. C. Pedder's *Where Men Decay* (1908), an analysis of conditions in the country, and C. F. G. Masterman's *The Condition of England* (1909), a brilliant and forgotten book that discerns 'the passing of a race of men' since 'a peasantry, unique in Europe in its complete divorce from the land, lacking ownership of cottage or tiniest plot of land, finds no longer any attraction in the cheerless toil of the agricultural labourer'. He quotes that able and perceptive priest, C. L. Marson, who, having set forth the new helplessness of the village, goes on to depict the future:

As things go on now we shall have empty fields, except for a few shepherds and herdsmen, in all the green of England. Nomadic herds will sweep over the country, sowing, shearing, grass-cutting, reaping and binding with machines: a system which does not make for health, peace, discipline, nobleness of life. . . . England is bleeding at her arteries, and it is her reddest blood which is flowing away.

More recent writers are H. J. Massingham, author of vigorous books on farming and country crafts (e.g. *Where Men Belong* (1946)), and George Ewart Evans. Characteristic works by the latter are *The Horse and the Furrow* (1960), a fresh and engaging account of horses and horsemen in farming, and *Where Beards Wag All* (1970), on another not overworked subject, the relevance of oral tradition, with some particularly valuable pages on the strengths of dialect.