

Introduction
A Survey of English Georgic Writing, 1521–2021
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This book is a history of English literary writing about the work of people and animals in farming communities, and about the land as it is understood through that work. Since the sixteenth century, English authors with rural interests have looked to a four-part didactic poem called the *Georgics* (29 BCE) by the Roman poet Virgil as a model for this kind of text. The classical and late medieval inheritance of agricultural writing is itself diverse and very ancient, as Philip Thibodeau shows in the first chapter of this collection. Yet it is Virgil's poem that has lent its title most often as a general label for farming literature, and it does again for this history.¹

There are two broad categories of English georgic writing. The first is a category of genre, made up by imitations and adaptations of Virgil's *Georgics*. These tend to be long, mixed poems about rural work in which a didactic authorial voice allows itself to be sidetracked at regular intervals into passages of historical narration, of philosophical discussion, of local description or of rhapsody. They were especially prestigious and widely read in Europe and America between the middle of the seventeenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.² Some poems of this kind make their lineage obvious, such as James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726–46), which features sections of direct imitation of the *Georgics*, and shares its four-part structure and rural outlook. In others, the agricultural content has fallen away from recognizable formal georgic structures, as is the case with John Milton's *Paradise Regained* (1671), for example, or with John Gay's entirely urban *Trivia: or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716). The second category of georgic is one of theme and mode, and it covers all sorts of literary texts, in poetry, prose and drama, that deal with life on the land in a practical way. Usually they share with Virgil's *Georgics* a distinctive circle of concerns: unremitting labour as human fate; the clash between progressive civilization and natural rhythms that are cyclical and recursive; the bonds between humans and companion species; the persistence of local attachments in national or imperial political contexts.

These themes are prominent, for example, in certain novels by Thomas Hardy, as discussed by Andrew Radford in Chapter 10 of this volume – although there is no formal georgic among Hardy’s surviving poems. The essays collected in this volume trace a literary history shared by these two categories of georgic writing. Together they show how georgic has been an ever-present and vital green force in English literary history from the sixteenth into the twenty-first century.

A growing body of literary criticism has recognized the variety and significance of English georgic writing.³ Other kinds of literature rise and evolve, or stay tied to some ancient precedent or well-defined form. Georgic is a different sort of tradition: fragmented and discontinuous, each iteration starting in a new direction, it is always too absorbed in external things – in natural processes and in human practices – to worry about formal conventions. Georgic is thought of sometimes as an interrupted genre, an abandoned literary form.⁴ This book argues on the contrary that it has been a constant presence in English and American culture over the last five hundred years. Yet you must know how to read and recognize it. *A History of English Georgic Writing* shows how, and gives a map of the territory.

Virgil’s *Georgics* is arranged in four parts, and foursquareness is a characteristic feature of georgic poetics. This *History of English Georgic Writing* has a correspondingly quadrilateral design, its sixteen chapters arranged in groups of four and eight. The first quarter (‘Turnings’) is made up of four chapters on different scales of change in rural writing: from ancient to modern, from season to season, from day to day, from tradition to technology. The second and third quarters (‘Times’) give a historical overview of English georgic writing in eight chapters. These feature readings of the principal georgic texts for each period, and specialist scholars find in each a scheme of wider contexts for period-specific knowledge. The final quarter (‘Territories’) looks at English georgic writing from the special perspectives of landscape and environment over four chapters: from home, the perspectives of rich lowland fen and open highland weald; from abroad, the perspectives of America, and of Britain’s history as a former colonial power.

This introductory chapter is a headland to the larger field. It is set aside for a general survey of English georgic writing, as viewed through the contexts of agrarian history in the British Isles, and of non-literary agricultural writing published over the last five centuries. The aim is to draw out some historical patterns, and to fill in some of the literary gaps between chapters. What none of the contributors to this volume proposes, however, is a continuous narrative of development in English georgic writing. This frees us from having to begin the survey at the very beginning. We can

start instead with a triptych of modern georgic snapshots, featuring three contemporary British writers. They will give us a sense of what formal resources the georgic tradition can afford to writers today.

Three Modern Georgic Snapshots

The first snapshot features the poet Simon Armitage. In May 2016, Armitage wrote a series of poems to accompany an exhibition at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival, featuring early aerial photography from the First World War. Most of the photographs are landscape ‘obliques’, unpopulated panoramic images taken during reconnaissance of the Somme battlefields. Armitage’s texts are translations from the *Georgics*, focused on Virgil’s darker passages, but still resolutely agricultural. The poems were printed onto transparent fascia fixed an inch in front of the enlarged military photographs, ‘to suggest an aerial detachment and perspective’, as Armitage explains it, ‘to bring about a form of “oblique” refraction’.⁵ This displacement makes sense of the photographs’ odd perspectives, and it matches the *Georgics* as well: Virgil designed his poem ‘to suggest a Truth indirectly’, wrote Joseph Addison in 1697, ‘and without giving us a full and open view of it: To let us see just so much as will naturally lead the Imagination into all the parts that lie conceal’d’.⁶ Like the wartime ‘obliques’, Armitage’s translations are down-to-earth and straight-talking. Yet they hold back from reading the missing soldiers and their bloody actions onto the battlefields. These they insist on seeing as agricultural landscapes, ready for seedtime, plough and harvest. The solemn didactic poetry leads our imaginations into war, but Armitage does not want us to approach too closely. Like Euridice ascending from death behind Orpheus in the fourth *Georgic*, the past only follows us until we turn to look straight at it.

A second georgic snapshot, more fleeting this time, features the novelist Ali Smith. In summer 2021 the Royal Academy of Arts exhibited a new series of works by David Hockney, ‘The Arrival of Spring’, painted by the artist at his home in Normandy the previous year using an iPad and stylus. Smith had published her novel *Spring* the year before. Like the other volumes in her ‘Seasonal Quartet’, the cover of *Spring* features a striking half-jacket image of a particular lane in Yorkshire painted by Hockney. So Smith was the obvious person to introduce the artist’s new work with an article for the *RA Magazine*. She illustrates her commentary on Hockney with vernal poetry by Thomas Carew, T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson and e.e. cummings, but her main exhibit is a passage from Virgil’s second *Georgic* (lines 336–42) in Kimberly Johnson’s translation:

Such days, I fancy, dawned upon the birth
 of the infant earth, and such a course they kept:
 spring it was, spring the wide world observed –
 the eastwinds spared their wintry blasts,
 when first the cattle drank in light, and the earthen line
 of men reared up its head from the stiff fields
 and beasts were released to forests and stars released to sky.⁷

The lines capture not only the beginning of all life on earth, but also the moment of respite between frost and heat when human consciousness at last looks up at it all – ‘the first noticing moment’, as Smith puts it. She sees it in Hockney’s pictures as well, when he captures the season’s ‘merry falling-over-itself, the swing of a branch loaded with not-snow, spring like the hinge on the seasonal door’. Georgics are poems about the pleasures and revelations of the everyday, according to Smith. They form a mediating genre, hemmed in between the heedless amorousness of pastoral and the pride of epic violence. They are still full of myth, but stripped of illusions. Armitage turns to georgic for a poetic mode at once ironic and deadly serious in its realism; Smith finds in it a trace of the generative pause in which true poetic attentiveness began.

In a third snapshot of contemporary georgic, the Virgilian inheritance lines up with modern British agricultural and environmental thinking. James Rebanks lives and works on an upland mixed rotational farm in Matteredale, near Ullswater in the English Lake District. There is nothing in the title of his second book, *English Pastoral* (2020), to surprise readers of his bestselling memoir *The Shepherd’s Life* (2015), which described the author’s annual cycle of work with a flock of tough Herdwick sheep (Suzanne Joinson discusses *The Shepherd’s Life* in Chapter 14 of this collection). However, it turns out that *English Pastoral’s* title is a little misleading: its contents are less pastoral – particularly ‘beseeming shepherds’, as Samuel Johnson defined it – than deeply georgic.⁸ Rebanks is drawn to the hardscrabble belligerence of life on a mixed farm as described by Virgil in the first *Georgic*: ‘His [Virgil’s] farming philosophy was that we had to take things from nature by using our wisdom and our tools, because the alternative was defeat and starvation.’⁹ He notices, as do many of the earlier writers discussed in this collection, that Virgil describes the plough and hoe as weapons (*arma*) in a war, and that by the same analogy the technology of modern agribusiness would be ‘something more comparable to tanks, jet fighters, and chemical and nuclear weapon systems’.¹⁰ Unremitting labour, learning through practice and commitment to a plot of ground are central georgic themes. Rebanks brings them together in the figure of his grandfather, who was ‘rooted in work,

connected to the soil and the crops and the animals upon it'.¹¹ He represents an inheritance of traditional knowledge embedded in farming landscapes, bloodstock lines and working communities.

English Pastoral wants to pass on some of that knowledge, but Virgilian didactic is hardly an option for mass-market non-fiction. So rather than offering direct instruction, Rebanks tells the story of his own schooling in the land. The policy-level argument here is that small marginal holdings like his are crucial components in the jigsaw of diversified British agriculture. They are repositories for the older understandings of land management and food production, knowledge that conventional farming needs to ensure its own sustainability at a time of recalibration for the agricultural sector.¹² At the end of the era of Common Agricultural Policy subsidies, as government looks to reward farmers for environmental stewardship as much as productivity, the argument is especially timely.

These snapshots show three high-profile contemporary writers drawing on the georgic tradition in different contexts. All three deploy Virgil's poem as a catalyst to bring alive stubborn cultural materials. Armitage's ghostly images from the military archive, Smith's poems and paintings of a fugitive season, Rebanks's passed-over agricultural ecologies: each is looking for a vivifying connection to the realm of everyday human practice in the natural world. In all three snapshots the perspective offered is oblique, reflecting georgic's characteristic poetics of openness and indirection. Georgic cannot think of a thing, a place or a process without thinking of its analogue or opposite at the same time. Battlefield and farm, painting and poem, rooted labour and abstracted technology, each is displayed as part of a larger scheme of natural patterns. Each involve historical artefacts – reconnaissance photographs, seventeenth-century lyrics, a shed of old farm tools – that require a serious attentiveness, an engagement stripped clean of nostalgia. Each represents a particular natural environment, and lets it stand in for somewhere else as well, for any landscape the reader has worked in and belonged to. It is a cluster of poetic functions that georgic is uniquely well equipped to perform. This collection of essays shows that English writers have been using the georgic mode to these ends for over five hundred years, and that in the second decade of the twenty-first century that georgic inheritance is as valuable and fruitful as it has ever been.

The Sixteenth Century

If Armitage, Smith and Rebanks give us a glimpse of where English georgic finds itself today, where does the story begin? Looking back in 1659 on

the history of vernacular agricultural writing, the educational reformer and horticulturalist Samuel Hartlib found nothing to challenge the primacy of his own *Discourse of the Whole Art of Husbandry* – at least, he argued, there was no earlier ‘*Systema* or compleat book’ of agriculture in English. ‘Till the latter end of Queen *Elizabeths* days’, he wrote,

I suppose that there was scarce a book wrote of this subject; I never saw or heard of any. About that time: *Tusser* made his verses, and *Scot* wrote about a Hop-garden, *Gouge* translated some things.¹³

Hartlib’s dismissive remark at least gives us some leads on the origins of English georgic. He was right: signs of the first growth of agricultural writing in the Tudor period are hard to spot. The *Georgics* themselves were familiar to scholarly readers at the start of the sixteenth century, and supplied hortulan themes to English humanist writers from the 1520s onwards. In fact, a Scots poet got there before anyone writing in English: the ‘Prologues’ of Gavin Douglas’s *Eneados* (completed 1513) have a georgic frame of reference and characteristically georgic themes – labour, didactics of practice, landscape and seasonality.¹⁴ There are georgic glimmerings in Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). The laws of the Utopians permit the invasion of neighbouring peoples who leave their fields idle and waste, a colonial extrapolation from Virgil’s ‘*neu segnes iaceant terrae*’.¹⁵ The Utopians are also self-sufficient horticulturalists, and More seems to have shared his contemporary Sir Thomas Elyot’s appreciation of the variety of cultivation discussed in the *Georgics*, ‘the divers graynes, herbes, and flowres, that be there described’, as Elyot put it in *The Governour* (1531), ‘that redig therein hit semeth to a man to be in a delectable gardeine or paradise’.¹⁶

The musician and farmer Thomas Tusser first ‘made his verses’ in 1557, though Hartlib’s true dawn for English georgic is the Elizabethan 1570s, when Tusser expanded *A Hundreth* into *Fiue Hundreth Points of Good Husbandry* (1573). They are discussed by Alexandra Harris in Chapter 2 and by Andrew McRae in Chapter 5. Hartlib also mentions Reynolde Scot’s *Perfite Platforme of a Hoppe Garden*, which appeared a year later, and Barnabe Googe’s *Foure bookes of husbandry, collected by M. Conradus Heresbachius*, which followed in 1557. In 1570, Roger Ascham had invoked ‘that perfite worke of the *Georgickes*’ as his model for poetic ‘epitome’. Virgil ‘used daily, whan he had written 40 or 50 verses, not to cease cutting, paring, and polishing of them, till he had brought them to the number of *x* or *xii*’ – the quartering proportions of the *Georgics* were always significant to the humanists.¹⁷ By the end of the decade, Edmund Spenser was incorporating georgic features into the pastoral of the *Shepheardes Calender*

(1579): his shepherds are ‘mortal men, that swincke and sweate’, while Virgil is remembered as one who left his sheepwalks ‘and laboured lands to yield the timely eare’.¹⁸ So Hartlib’s first shoots of English agricultural writing appeared among the established greenery of humanist literary georgic.

The Seventeenth Century

Hartlib goes on to mention ‘divers small Treatises’ on agriculture written later by ‘divers, as Sir *Hugh Platts*, *Gab. Platts*, *Markham*, *Blith*, and *Butler*, who do well in divers things’.¹⁹ Two of these ‘divers’ (i.e., partial and unsystematic) books belong to the first decade of the seventeenth century, and are happy still to cite Virgil’s *Georgics* as a technical authority. Sir Hugh Platts’s *New and Admirable Arte of Setting of Corne* (1600) refers to Virgil’s strictures on the selection and preservation of seed stock, while Charles Butler’s enduringly popular *The Feminine Monarchie, or a Treatise Concerning Bees* (1609) quotes extensively from the fourth *Georgic*.²⁰ Edward Maxey’s *New Instruction [sic] of Plowing and Setting of Corne* (1601) is another late Elizabethan book advocating rectilinear regularity in farming practice, while *A Surveyor’s Dialogue* (1607) by John Norden, a topographer and mapmaker with much experience of crown estates, stands out, according to Joan Thirsk, as an early Jacobean work remarkable for the precision and range of its local information on soil types and social patterns.²¹

Is it a coincidence that this flourishing of agricultural books during the first decades of the seventeenth century happened at the same time as Francis Bacon turned, in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), to the *Georgics* as his model for a new kind of progressive inquiry that no longer ‘dispsied to be conuersant in ordinary and common matters’? After all, wrote Bacon, Virgil got as much literary fame from his observations on husbandry as he did from his epic poetry:

*Nec sum animi dubius verbis ea vincere magnum,
 Quam sit & angustis his addere rebus honorem.*

And surely if the purpose be in good earnest not to write at leasure that which men may read at leasure, but really to instruct and suborne Action and actiue life, these Georgickes of the mind concerning the husbandry & tillage therof, are no lesse worthy then the heroical descriptions of *vertue*, *duty*, & *felicity*.²²

Where the *Aeneid* depends for its moral power on a precarious process of exemplarity, according to Bacon, the *Georgics* has a method (and perhaps even a psychology) of education built into it.²³ Earlier in the *Advancement*

Bacon had quoted Virgil's famous distinction in the second *Georgic* between the contentment of the rustic and the happiness of the Epicurean philosopher ('Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas' – 'Blessed is he who has succeeded in learning the laws of nature's working').²⁴ In her influential reading of these passages, Annabel Patterson argues that Bacon was advancing a new blend of inward-looking pastoralism (Stoic in origin, rooted in the 'cultura animi' tradition) with a distinctly georgic emphasis on human labour and inventiveness – 'a principled synthesis of two conceptual structures'.²⁵ The prominence of these quotations in Bacon's text suggest that the psychological and therapeutic components of his programme, as well as the practical ones, could be supplied out of the *Georgics*, without bothering too much about Virgil's own strictly pastoral writings.²⁶

Of the remaining three agricultural writers mentioned ('*Gab. Platts, Markham, Bliith*'), Gervase Markham belongs more to the Jacobean flush of English georgic writing than to Hartlib's own mid-century moment. In the first of his agricultural books, *The English Husbandman* (1613; followed by a *Second Book*, 1614; and a *Farwell to Husbandry*, 1620), Markham claimed that it was an English paraphrase of the *Georgics* – presumably Abraham Fleming's translation (or 'mere crib') of 1589 – that provoked him to write. He objected to Virgil's methods on account not of their ancientness, but of their 'onely belonging to the Italian climbe, & nothing agreeable to ours'.²⁷ Thomas Fuller later reported that the poet Samuel Daniel took up farming at around the same time, but with doubtful success, blamed once again on the inappropriate continental influence of Virgil:

For though he [Daniel] was well vers'd in *Virgil*, his fellow *Husbandman-Poet*, yet there is more required to make a rich Farmer, than only to say his *Georgicks* by heart, and I question whether his *Italian* will fit our *English Husbandry*.²⁸

Over the same decade in which Daniel turned farmer and Markham published the *English Husbandman* volumes, Michael Drayton produced the first great English chorographical georgic, *Poly-Olbion* (1612, 1622). Drayton goes even further than Markham in scolding 'this lunatique Age' for entertaining 'fantasies of forraine inventions'.²⁹ British specificity is a necessary first step towards Drayton's real theme in *Poly-Olbion*, which is the particularity of regions within a diverse national prospect. In Drayton's poetics, each landscape and feature has a name and a voice with which to reveal itself. The general perspectives of earlier antiquaries are folded into particular descriptions, 'making the various places themselves recite England's chronicle history', as Richard Helgerson puts it.³⁰ In

Chapter 5 of this volume, Andrew McRae's assessment is that for Drayton and his contemporaries the *Georgics* changed from a stable, universal classical authority into a dynamic catalyst for understanding a time of precarious national politics: 'Georgic did not so much present a model for understanding their world', he concludes, 'as provide resources that helped them to think for themselves'. In the first two decades of the seventeenth century, georgic came into its early modernity.

The next historical hotspot for English georgic was the 1650s and 1660s, the age of Hartlib himself and of our two remaining authors ('*Gab. Platts*' and '*Bliith*'). Gabriel Plattes is best known today as the author of an early Baconian utopia with much to say about agricultural improvement, *A Description of Macaria* (1641), and for the role he played in Hartlib's correspondence network.³¹ Plattes first published on agriculture in the late 1630s, but his main contribution to the subject was his 1656 treatise *Practical Husbandry Improved*, very much a work of the 1650s, with its restless emphasis on technical innovation and experiment.³² Another member of the network was Leicestershire farmer and 'lover of ingenuity' Walter Blith. In his 1649 treatise *The English Improver*, Blith recommended six basic methods of fertilization, drainage and ploughing, none of them especially original. Yet by the time he revised his book as *The English Improver Improved* (1652) three years later, he had found half a dozen new techniques to promote, including the cultivation of special crops for fodder, textiles, seed oil and dyeing.³³ Hartlib was also responsible for the publication of Sir Richard Weston's *Discours of Husbandrie used in Brabant and Flanders* (1650), the earliest English work to promote the use of turnips and clover in crop rotations on marginal land. The *Discours* is another instance of Hartlib's inclusive, expansive cultural energies: Weston wrote his treatise as a Royalist exile in the Low Countries, but in Hartlib's hands it was converted to the Commonwealthsman's cause by the addition of material from one of his lieutenants, Cressy Dimock, the circle's most enthusiastic advocate of land reform, mechanical innovation and agricultural education. Turning to the classically georgic topic of apiculture, Hartlib published another book that converted Charles Butler's 'feminine monarchie' of the hive into a republicanized 'Common-wealth of Bees', fit to produce industrial quantities of honey and wax.³⁴

The restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 and Hartlib's death two years later threatened to dissipate the georgic energies of the previous decade, but in the event they were converted and extended once again. Two years after its foundation in 1662 the Royal Society convened a 'Georgical Committee', with old Hartlib correspondents John Evelyn and

Ralph Austen among its thirty-two members.³⁵ A year after that Austen carefully updated his *Treatise of Fruit-Trees* (1653), apparently trimming it for the new Caroline regime. In its first edition, published under the Protectorate, Austen had advocated the cultivation of apple orchards for the sake of economic development and the employment of the poor. In a new preface to the 1665 edition, now dedicated to Robert Boyle and the work of the Royal Society, Austen changed his emphasis to the promotion of well-regulated and profitable cider production for the benefit of proprietors.³⁶ A few years later the innovations that Walter Blith had proposed in 1653 were swallowed whole and then extended by John Worlidge in his *Systema agriculturae* (1669), the most compendious farming publication of the age.³⁷ Another work revised across a series of editions that spanned the restoration was Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* (1653; final authorial edition 1676), a sporting miscellany containing prose dialogue, natural history and tavern balladry, concerned more with riverside recreation rather than agricultural labour – but its mode is unmistakably didactic and georgic.³⁸

Once again, there are circumstantial connections between these Hartlibian continuities and the further development of georgic modalities in post-Restoration literary culture. In *Paradise Lost* (1667), Hartlib's friend John Milton places georgic labour at the heart of the prelapsarian everyday, and develops the theme further as a marker of what changes after the fall.³⁹ A case can be made for the georgic formalism of Milton's four-book *Paradise Regained* (1671), which is at very least, as Alastair Fowler puts it, a 'brief epic with georgic modulation'.⁴⁰ In the plans for the funeral of Oliver Cromwell in 1658, Hartlib and Milton are seen walking with another poet, Andrew Marvell.⁴¹ The beneficent floods that feature in Marvell's poems 'Upon Appleton House' (written 1651) and 'The First Anniversary' (1655) have long been connected with georgic techniques for levelling and fertilizing water meadows by floating them with silty water, as set out by Sir Richard Weston and Walter Blith.⁴² As Melissa Schoenberger shows in Chapter 6 of this volume, the georgic tradition emerged in its full agrarian form at several seventeenth-century moments, while at others its presence constituted 'merely part of a looser georgic mode that winds and weaves its way through various genres and forms'.

So in the mid-seventeenth century we see moments of convergence between literary georgic and practical agricultural instruction. The georgic poetry of this period is characterized by its efforts 'to extend the exegesis of Virgil's text into the practice of agriculture', as Douglas Chambers has drily put it.⁴³ Yet poetry and instruction are set far apart at the turn of the eighteenth century by John Dryden's era-defining translation of