INTRODUCTION

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'It is astonishing how little literature has to show of the poor,' wrote Ford Madox Ford in 1906. This is particularly true (and remains so) of the rural poor: what one Victorian Commission described as the 'ruinous hovels' of the idyllic-looking cottages of England were rarely ventured into by writers – even by Thomas Hardy, whose working-class characters are mostly skilled artisans. Poor, of course, must not be confused with pauperism: and what appeared miserably cold to a Victorian inspector might be quite acceptable to a hardy cottager who has spent most of his or her life out of doors. Yet the fact remains that generation after generation of the peasantry have vanished without leaving a trace either textual or physical, except when they disturb the ruling order under an undifferentiated thicket of pitchforks.

The exceptions to the rule are few: the astonishing one of John Clare's poetry; sympathetic verse by Wordsworth and Crabbe; or the writings of self-educated labourers such as Alfred Williams in the last century. Oral utterances recorded verbatim or in reported speech by social commentators and historians, beginning with William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* in 1830 and continuing on through works such as Richard Heath's *The English Peasant* (1893), L. P. Jacks's lightly-fictionalised stories in *Mad Shepherds* (1910), or George Ewart Evans's lyrical records of Suffolk lore in the 1950s, are inevitably filtered by the needs and sensitivities of the author, at least before the age of the tape recorder.

W. H. Hudson – naturalist, essayist, novelist – is a distinguished and neglected member of this company, although his qualities make it hard to shut him into any sort of defining cage. As he admits in *A Shepherd's Life* – perhaps the greatest work in his prolific output – he envies the

birds their wings. But when he says, thinking of his beloved Wylye valley in Wiltshire, that he 'would rather know the histories of these humble, unremembered lives than of the great ones of the vale,' he is part of a movement that is as much social as it is literary, despite his horror of the 'socialist vans' stirring up trouble in the slumbering villages. 'There's nothing to tell; he was only a labourer,' as the old woman before a downland grave puts it, who comes to haunt Hudson until he writes her out of himself: 'He was just one of us.'

Confusingly for tidy minds, Hudson is also a worshipper of wild, non-human nature, and so tends to be defined as a late Romantic primitivist in opposition to commercial, urban or even humanist values. At the same time he retains a certain naturalist's detachment to his passion: his roots are in both the careful observations of the pre-romantic Gilbert White, as well as in the epiphanic moments of the naturist Richard Jefferies, who also preferred wilderness to humanity – and who is buried, coincidentally, in the same Worthing cemetery as Hudson. Like the better-known Jefferies, Hudson feels (as he puts it in his memoir of childhood, *Far Away and Long Ago*) that 'when I am out of sight of living, growing grass, and out of sound of birds' voices and all rural sounds . . . I am not properly alive.' No wonder D. H. Lawrence loved Hudson's work.

Yet Hudson is also, as Jefferies declared of himself, 'a student of nature and human life'. The chief difference between them is that Jefferies was a native Wiltshireman, and Hudson a foreigner, even to England: the former, especially in the brilliant *Hodge and His Masters* (1880), is the farmer's son telling us in knowing detail what late Victorian farm-life consisted of: Hudson is the inquisitive stranger in the rapt process of finding out.

I first read *A Shepherd's Life* some thirty years ago, fresh out of university and struggling to run my own travelling theatre company. Strictly provincial, our 'travelling' mostly kept to the numerous villages that dotted the chalk downland of Berkshire, Wiltshire and Hampshire. My model was the itinerant medieval player, and I eventually lived

(on a peppercorn rent, thanks to the eccentric owner) in a bare and unheated fourteenth-century thatched cottage in Aldbourne, a Wiltshire village that Hudson's impassioned literary successor, H. J. Massingham, reckoned 'the chalkiest of the Wiltshire villages'.

Our puppeteer had borrowed *A Shepherd's Life* from the pool stock of the county library, in an ugly wartime Everyman's edition whose return date is, I'm now alarmed to see, 6th October 1980; she enthused about its qualities and – since our shows used local legends and stories – about its potential as source material.

I was delighted to see myself mentioned in the first paragraph: 'I am unable to bring to mind an instance of a lover of Wiltshire who was not a resident, or had not been to Marlborough and loved the country on account of early associations.' I had been to Marlborough ('the College'), and despite the nightmare of my first two years there, or perhaps because of it, had become deeply attached to the surrounding downland and beechwoods, in which I sought escape and solitude from the apparent barbarism of boarding school (my parents were in Africa).

The book was an illumination. Up until the Victorian period, shepherds had been given guest roles in pastoral poems or plays as idealised metaphors of the Arcadian good life, usually costumed in classical dress. A rare exception, as ever, is Shakespeare: a tantalising glimpse of reality is given in *As You Like It*, when the shepherd Corin faces off Touchstone's pastoral longings with some down-to-earth natural philosophy, and refers to his hands as 'greasy', 'hard' and 'often tarred over with the surgery of our sheep'. The vivid observation overwhelms the literary device, but is soon swept away in courtly banter. Hudson's book, however, gave Corin centre stage, and in a way that had nothing to do with dramatic devices.

I had talked a great deal, in field, house or pub, with people – generally old – who recalled the countryside a generation or more before, when it was perfectly normal to take a horse to plough, to gather the villagers for harvest-making, and many practices that have now vanished with the coming of agribusiness and the industrialisation of the land. Some

seventy years earlier, Hudson had done the same, and thus connected with a time even remoter, right back to the early nineteenth century – when Constable was painting those working landscapes that have eternalised a certain idea of England: as much a chocolate-box lid concealing toxic matter as a bucolic vision from which we feel chronically alienated.

These people, it seemed to me, had a certain wisdom about them. For those in their seventies or more (many, like Hudson's characters, were still active on the land), the First World War loomed especially large: and I felt the poignant innocence in *A Shepherd's Life* – for all the author's pessimism concerning civilisation and progress – of what lay in wait four years after the book was first published; and most especially, as I walked the wintry downland to some lonely barrow stranded in the vast ploughed-up acreage (devoid of human activity bar the occasional lonely tractor), of all that was to follow in this very landscape, though time and again Hudson seems to suspect it. And I was particularly interested in shepherds – not just because, next to the upland farm where I'd work piecemeal, the shepherd was a girl not much older than myself.

Shepherds are traditionally regarded as having a special kind of wisdom, fruit of long and solitary hours quietly observing the natural world, and untainted by the schoolroom. But his hours are mute, and shepherds are the opposite of garrulous: like Caleb, they fence off the bolder sort of question with indirect replies. Whenever I meet with a gnarled French shepherd in the Cévennes mountains, where I have lived for the last twenty years, I am reminded of him.

Except that in his case, there is something less wilful about it. Caleb Bawcombe is an old man: he has simply forgotten. 'It was of little use to question him,' Hudson admits; 'the one valuable recollection he possessed on any subject would . . . not be available when wanted; it would lie just beneath the surface so to speak, and he would pass and repass over the ground without seeing it.' Over the years, Hudson's patience rewarded him with glimpses, the kind that naturalists are familiar with in 'wild nature'; these he then collected and shaped, staying in the (still-extant) Hindon inn during the spring and summer of 1909.

The result was remarkable in that it managed to preserve this patient, piecemeal method in a way that renders the reader active. We feel we are also being 'watchful', walking with Hudson on this obscure mental adventure, rather than reading a long-ago report in our chair. Whether conscious or not, Hudson's method is extremely subtle; it combines what Ernest Rhys called the essayist's 'talking mode of writing, as natural . . . as speech itself', with the more deliberate techniques of the storyteller.

Suspense, for instance: he pricks our interest with a passing mention of some mystery – such as the Ellerby curse, or Caleb's obscure guilt – only to wait several chapters for the elucidation. He can even enact this in a single scene, as in that wonderful aforementioned encounter with the illiterate old woman cleaning the graves in the downland churchyard (a perfect case study, by the way, in metafictional practice). Exactly as Caleb does, Hudson glances off a subject, returns to it again later, perhaps several times, but never quite fixes it, so that it retains its freedom and elusiveness, even its wildness. This is perhaps the proof of real artistry, even genius, in a writer, rather than the mechanical skill – the neat parkland, if you like – of what so often passes (especially these days under the gaze of prize juries) for good, even literary writing.

It certainly feels natural, even when Hudson is writing a novel. In *Green Mansions*, published in 1904, Abel the adventurer spends several chapters searching 'his' stretch of Guyanan forest for the mysterious sweet-singing being that turns out to be Rima, the native bird-girl who embodies the untrammelled beauty of nature, and whose death, unwittingly brought about by Abel, symbolises its abuse at our hands. This is not so much suspense, in fact, as the exercise of patience, the process ornithologists live for – even when the search proves fruitless, the prey too elusive. (Incidentally, the novel includes some of the finest descriptions ever written of what we now call rainforest.)

This is only to be expected in Hudson's case, since his childhood back garden was the Argentinian pampas. His parents were American sheep farmers, and the eight-strong family lived in a small three-roomed cabin some twenty-five miles from Buenos Aires. Visiting eccentrics tutored

the children, but otherwise school was unknown to them. Hudson was born there, at Quilmas in the La Plata region, on 6th August 1841, and five years later the family moved to a more remote ranch with an attached store. The only wealth was the vast and 'undulating' pampas, over which the children roamed like wild things, almost at one with its myriad and marvellous creatures, little William feeling a particular affinity with birds. This, of course, is why his adult self felt so at home on the 'great green sea' (Massingham's words) of our southern downland.

At fifteen, Hudson fell severely ill with typhus, which bequeathed him crippling bouts of ill-health and a tendency to bookish introspection. His parents died in 1869, and a few years later Hudson left for London, never to return. He married the landlady of his gloomy boarding house in Westbourne Grove, becoming a British citizen only in 1900. The couple's genteel poverty was relieved somewhat by a Civil List Pension in 1901, while Hudson's reputation slowly accrued, and not just among bird-lovers.

Joseph Conrad, writing in what was admittedly his third language, commented ruefully: 'How does that fellow get his effects? He writes as the grass grows.' John Galsworthy, in his introduction to an American edition of *Green Mansions* in 1915, went so far as to say: 'Of all living authors – now that Tolstoi has gone – I could least dispense with W. H. Hudson.' (Thomas Hardy, then at the height of both his fame and his poetic powers, might not have appreciated the remark.) The philosopher William James, Hudson's exact contemporary, listed him as one of his heroes (along with Wordsworth, Emerson and Shelley) for showing 'the limitless significance in natural things.' More recently, Jonathan Bate in his ground-breaking work of eco-criticism, *The Song of the Earth* (2001), perceptively suggested that the underrated Hudson 'writes so well about English rural life because it seems strange to him, because he sees it with the unsentimental eyes of an outsider.'

Among his close friends was Edward Thomas, whose subtle natural and human observations are kin to his own. The Edwardian period saw an intense nostalgia for a rural way of life overwhelmed by a century

of industrial growth, and offered concomitant remedies: some of these an anti-humanist version of Darwinian evolution, others full of a post-romantic whimsy. Hudson hovers somewhere in between: his radical critique of what he terms the 'contagion' of Western civilisation and its so-called 'improvements' has something in common, not just with his admired Thoreau, but with the eco-theology of the US agrarian Liberty Hyde Bailey (1858-1954), whose *The Holy Earth* was a founding text for American environmentalism, just as Hudson was a founder-member of the RSPB and helped encourage the flourishing 'back to earth' movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

It is likely that Bailey would have read Hudson in the various American editions. If so, he must have appreciated their mingling of naturalism and lyricism, and the vein of anger that in his own work swells to a tub-thumping, Biblical rhetoric ('Man has dominion, but he has no commission to devastate'); Hudson preferred biology to theology, and his fury is more akin to a sudden flash of plumage, or the sly swipe of a sharp beak – as when he compares those with wild, gypsy blood to ourselves, who live in houses and have a 'vast army of sanitary inspectors, physicians and bacteriologists' safeguarding us from 'that wicked stepmother who is anxious to get rid of us before our time!'

John Moore in *Country Men* (1935) suggested that if Hudson could indeed get 'gloriously angry at times', it was partly the result of being involuntarily cooped up in 'monstrous' London, far from his beloved wild spaces. There is certainly something unreasoned about his sudden attack, in a eulogy to the marigold, on the ant-like 'superfluous millions' of the cities. But there were other reasons to rail: Salisbury Plain was already becoming Army terrain and thus 'dispossessed', while much of the downland's lovely, springy turf was being ploughed up, giving it the much bleaker aspect we are familiar with now (although even Hudson, despite his suspicion of science, could not have imagined it being drenched in chemicals, its bird life in particular reduced to a fraction of its former state).

He laments the passing of the 'unobtrusive' type of village that he finds

quietly lingering in his beloved Wylye valley, soothing the mind 'like the sight of trees', and as far from our own semi-urbanised settlements as any bush village in Africa. Given the current tendency to turn their front gardens into a private car park, his rhapsody on the flower-nestled cottages makes for painful reading. Neither is he completely blind to the interior squalor and overcrowdedness of many of these same cottages, although nowhere does he match the alarming descriptions of the numerous Victorian reports of reformers.

Hudson does, however, share with Massingham an unfortunate illusion: that downland bareness is natural. We now know that prehistoric people were as destructive of forests as we are, and that the downland's original tree cover, shallow-rooting in the chalk, was destroyed over a surprisingly short period – perhaps a few centuries. The special bleak beauty of the downs is man-made. This gives a mournful twist to his memorable observation in *Far Away and Long Ago*: 'In this exceedingly practical age men quickly lay the axe at the root of things which, in their view, only cumber the ground.'

The heedless maiming or killing of animals (which includes egg-collecting) particularly exercises Hudson's ire: he returns to the iniquities of the pheasant shoot and its requirement of huge areas of controlled and keeper-policed woodland again and again – 'an utterly selfish and degraded form of sport'. Nothing, perhaps, more succinctly symbolises the clash of moneyed civilisation with wildness. His descriptions of gamekeepers – with whom he held polite conversations, it has to be said – made me rejoice when I first read them, so closely did they match our own local keeper, the ageing Bob, whose wretched, muddy spaniel seemed to have a homing device, judging by the number of times it would catch me trespassing as a young man in the Berkshire woods belonging to Bob's employer. This was a wealthy landlord by the name of Fairhurst, who kept dozens of Belgian army trucks secreted on his land in anticipation of the socialist revolution, and who perfectly fitted Hudson's portrait of the man who, 'mean, sordid, greedy, tyrannous,' rises by these means to 'mastership'.

Indeed, Hudson's account of the terrible Elijah Raven and his clash with Caleb is one of the highlights of *A Shepherd's Life*, but so also is his more generalised description of the appalling social conditions of the rural labourer immediately after the Napoleonic wars, only mildly bettered in his own day: he returns repeatedly to the agricultural riots of 1830, punished with staggering vindictiveness and whose history is still poorly known. 'The introduction of thrashing machines was but the last straw,' Hudson fumes, 'the culminating act of the hideous system followed by landlords and their tenants.' Many of the labourers (who obligingly smashed the machines but left heads alone) were recommended to mercy – transportation instead of swinging – 'but the mercy of that time was like that of the wicked, exceedingly cruel'. Everything conspired to make the farmers 'very fat' and pay higher and higher rents to their 'fat' landlords, while the 'human devil in his black cap' sorted any starving labourer who protested.

But Hudson's version is supported, as usual, by an eyewitness report from a woman in her nineties, who began as a flint-gatherer in the winter fields at the age of ten. This is a very rare instance of that long-forgotten period being remembered by one of its sufferers. By the end of the chapter, when the miserly extra shilling a week granted by the anxious farmers had been 'cut off' and the starvation wages were back, most readers will be just as righteously enraged, and apply the lesson to our own profit-driven and now globalised times of glaring social injustice – the countryside sterilised by agribusiness and harshly wounded by development.

Bailey might also have agreed with Hudson that nature, for all her loveliness, can easily match mankind for cruelty. There is much of this mutual cruelty veining *A Shepherd's Life*, despite the shepherd's own tenderness for wild things: the tale of the pedlar and his yew-poisoned donkeys, for instance, or the suffering of the sheepdog bitten by the adder, help to give the book that unsentimental, Hardyesque tone of the true country work. And even wildness in humans has its limits: Hudson shows great sympathy for the true gypsies (a sympathy more

common a hundred years ago than now), but loathes their habit of beating the bushes for fledglings. When a shepherd's dog shows chronic disobedience, or grows old and irritable (natural traits, surely), it is shot: on his parents' sheep farm in Argentina, he tells us, all the dogs were hanged after harassing a neighbour's flock.

Neither is Caleb himself drawn with an idealising hand: his disappointments, gloomy moments and even tragedies are subtly shaped without being betrayed by artistry. They are honest to themselves. For instance, when the ageing shepherd leaves his native village of Winterbourne Bishop to follow his wife, we are reminded of John Clare's traumatic move from Helpston, his birthplace, to Northborough, some three miles away:

> The summer like a stranger comes
> I pause and hardly know her face.

There are statues to Hudson in his native Argentina, where he is known as G. E. Hudson (Guillermo Enrique) and most admired for his fiction: he found solace, it seems, in those most rooted in place, and who had yet known an equivalent uprooting on a much smaller, but no less important, scale. Even Hudson's nationality is confused. He belongs as much to the air as to the earth, like the gypsies and the birds and the patient, observant shepherd gazing out upon the high downland at the bottom of the sky. As this particular one confesses, surviving as a voice on a page: '"I've been told that it's a poor way to spend a life . . . but I never seen it like that; I liked it, and I always did my best."'

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Monoblet, the Cévennes, 2010