



INTRODUCTION

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I met Adrian Bell towards the end of his life, and I was a close friend of John Nash for much of my life, and so *Men and the Fields*, their perfect collaboration of words and pictures, has long been one of those books which seem to spell out my early landscape language. The fields in the title lie between Bottengoms Farm, John's house, and Creems, Adrian's house, with the River Stour glinting through them. But during the Thirties they had lived less than a mile apart, John during the summer holidays and Adrian all the time. John rented The Thatch and Adrian had managed to purchase Creems, lovely, delapidated old places which had stared across the wide shallow valley for centuries. Adrian's wife Marjorie described its fascination for artists, it having been painted by Gainsborough and Constable.

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Picture seeking with John Nash. Found something much to his purpose in Kid's Hole at the back of Green's. The artists, man and wife, staying in Green's are stanced here daily, doing a scene in which the Finch harvest-team figures, have to move every time wagon leaves stack, and he hadn't half finished horses and wagon. John wants to a picture of the valley from under the elm . . . Poor John . . . his work is somewhat complicated by this hide-and-peek . . . I told Batten (the shepherd) he was an artist, or at least a topiarist, clipping his sheep into broad-backed beauties.

John was in his mid-forties, Adrian a few years younger. John had fought on the Western Front and had been an official

War Artist, Adrian had left Chelsea to apprentice himself to a Suffolk farmer. John had lost his little son in a motor accident, Adrian and Marjorie had a new baby daughter. Both men were already seen as remarkable interpreters of the English countryside. Adrian had published a wonderful trilogy of quietly novelised memoirs, *Corduroy*, *Silver Ley* and *The Cherry Tree* and their success provided the poise and confidence of *Men and the Fields*. John Nash's watercolours especially flowed, as it were, into the lithographs and drawings of this shared creation to perfection. It is among the best rural literature of the twentieth century.

I have written about its power to evoke in the purest of terms those last moments of the great agricultural depression. Neither writer nor artist knew any farming world other than that in slump. A second war would bring subsidies and unprecedented recovery and wealth. But it would also destroy the apparently timeless universe of *Men and the Fields*. So this book can be seen as an unconscious threnody to a scene which was about to disappear for ever, for neither writer nor artist looked ahead, or indeed looked back. Their commentary is of the present and this again is what makes *Men and the Fields* so compelling. For the reader is at once present at those final sowings and reapings, those pea-pickings, those naked plungings in the summer river, and in those social divisions. Adrian Bell is the least sensational and the least dramatic of twentieth century country writers, but also the least probing and among the most truthful. It is because from twenty onwards he has himself ploughed and weeded, dug and sown the land. Much of it 'loving' (cloying) land which weighed one down and wore one out. Just as John Nash had been weighed down by the mud of the trenches. Both knew, although they never mention it, that they were recording the last work-scenes of all those farm-labourers listed on the war memorials, and it is this, not any

awareness that the old rural economy is coming to a halt, that maybe unconsciously brings such a seriousness to their book.

Both Adrian Bell's and John Nash's unique talents for presenting the 'now' – that particular threshing week, that actual market day, those snows or rains – raise them above the considerable number of 'country writers' of the inter-war years. East Anglia grew a great crop of them. R.H. Mottram, Michael Home, Lilius Rider Haggard, Henry Williamson, A.E. Coppard, W.H. Freeman, S.L. Bensusan, these are the finest of them and it is in their company that Adrian Bell belongs.

Like the trilogy, *Men and the Fields* reveals a young writer's happiness. It shows youth in progress, not a time remembered. The earlier books are a cheerful finding of his farming feet, of toiling all hours. But now Adrian is the professional writer and in love with words. In his Foreword to *Silver Ley* he says,

“What determined me to be a farmer? Perhaps the array of heavy horses paraded in the grand ring of the Suffolk Show in 1920 – the most opulent sight I have ever seen. I do know well that at a certain hour of a certain evening in June of my first year on a farm, as I returned from a visit home and clicked the latch of the gated road to the farmhouse, I said to myself, ‘This is my home now.’” So *Men and the Fields* is really an account of this home and this ‘family’ of neighbours, near to which I was born and where I have dwelt most of life, looking at these very fields and some of the descendants of these very men – and women and children. John Constable walked through it many a time, going to see his uncles and aunts, often sketching all the way. And I would often sit on a bank whilst John Nash drew trees and ponds. Soon after *Akenfield* the kind Southwold folk gave Adrian Bell and myself a literary luncheon. He had left the Stour Valley for the Waveney Valley by then and the whole of the Suffolk we knew so well spread between

us. If I drove across it with John Nash he would sometimes slow down to note a view – “That’s a good bit” – and come back to draw it. The pictures in *Men and the Fields* are poetic and witty, and accurate in every detail. These are binders and carts in fine running order, this is a church (Wissington) where one could pray in. John has drawn a lively canoe breasting some rushes. The Stour was then impacted with marvellous plants and blocked with timber from collapsed locks, and almost invisible for miles. One day whilst Adrian Bell and John Nash were working on their book the village boys dared them to bring a boat from Sudbury to Bures bridge. Stung by nettles and insects, muddy, worn out, exhausted, they just about managed it, slipping beneath the bridge in clear water to mighty cheers.

In *Men and the Fields* the writer and artist are witnesses of the farming. In *Silver Ley* Adrian in his early twenties is doing it. It is this practical involvement with the land which gives him the right to describe the agricultural community of those now far-off days as he does. John Nash too had generations of soil on his boots. This is Adrian’s apologia from *Silver Ley*;

“As I ploughed I thought. When I rested the horses on the headlands I looked about me. I heard the clock in the village below strike one, but I knew that those who put their hands to the plough did not leave off till two-thirty. And, seeing that today I was a ploughman, I continued. But I realised that my present work was more of a gesture than a real attack of the autumn cultivation before me. It was a mere obedience of the first rule of arable farming: that horses must not stand still. At two-thirty I surveyed my work. So narrow compared with the rest of the field looked the strip of dark earth I had been all this while making even and wide. There was much else to be done, and that quickly; harrowing, trimming the grass from the sides of the fields, hedges

to cut down, manure to cart . . .”

And books to write. Books such as *Men and the Fields* in which he and his friend can stand back and soliloquise – can watch the work being done. Now almost no one works on the fields and all the elms under which John Nash painted have gone. Yet the land itself and the loops of the dredged river, and the old houses in which this excellent country book was made exist in a tidier pattern. One continues to feel the sun and the cold in this beautiful liaison of text and illustration even if the social distinctions are marked and most of the field-work skills are quite gone. This is what fields do, they remain. But their men do not.

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