



## INTRODUCTION

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James Rebanks

A . G. STREET'S *Farmer's Glory* is rightly regarded as one of the great farming books.

I first read it when I was seventeen years old and working on my father's farm. I got paid 40 pounds a week, and my keep, and like a lot of farmers' sons before me, was a kind of 'indentured servant' (yes, this was the 1990s, but some things on farms never change). There wasn't a lot else to do on winter nights, because we lived miles from the local town, or even the nearest pub, so I turned to reading, for entertainment, and perhaps also for a kind of freedom and escape.

My mother had inherited a tattered copy of *Farmer's Glory* from her school-teacher father when he died. It sat in her glass-fronted bookcase slightly overshadowed by other seemingly cooler books by French, Russian and American writers. But, eventually, when I'd finished with Camus and Hemingway, I got round to reading it, and I loved it.

It was full of parallels with my own life, and years later I realise it shaped how I think about farming and had an influence on my own writing in *The Shepherd's Life*.

The very same copy of *Farmer's Glory* now sits on my writing desk, in a stack of my favourite 'farming' books, all of them worn and torn and with endless folded pages, as truly used and loved books should be. This stack is very small because there aren't many really good books about

farming; the harsh truth is that a lot of them are clichéd, riddled with nostalgia, often outdated and dull.

It is tempting as a farmer-writer to use your book as an extended lecture for the misguided urban populace, but that makes for a terrible book. Farmers have often self-selected themselves away from literary activities and the world of books, or been defined by teachers and others as being suited for other pursuits. They are often a little too proud of being practical to be proud of any kind of intellectual achievement, like writing. Other dull but worthy farming books are written for farmers, and as such can be almost impenetrable for a wider readership.

A. G. Street wrote his books for that wider audience, because he knew British agriculture lives or dies depending on the value that the British public gives it when they cast their votes, and when they go to the shops and spend their money. His memoir was an attempt through story to reach out and tell those people what was happening and why. A. G. Street is a wonderfully easy writer to follow on a journey into the English farming landscape.

Farmer-writers tend to have been half-cocked farmers (Henry Williamson or Ted Hughes spring to mind) or lousy writers. There are, I'm convinced, almost no great farmers who are also great writers. Both farming and writing are obsessional and all-consuming, so perhaps ultimately you have to choose whether to be outside doing the hundreds of undone jobs that crowd and torment a farmer's mind, or inside scribbling or hammering away at a computer keyboard.

Beatrix Potter (Mrs Heelis) is a fascinating case in point. All the best work dates from when she escaped from a stuffy, urban upper-middle class household in London. Then, as she went 'native' as a Lakeland farmer and landowner, her publishers found it increasingly difficult to get any writing out of her. She was busy breeding Herdwick sheep and being a farmer.

Being a good farmer means losing yourself in the land you are responsible for, of ceasing to exist outside of its concerns. A farm swallows you up, makes you a slave to its rhythms and concerns. If it doesn't consume you, then you probably aren't focused on it properly.

As I write, I am unsettled by the clouds gathering away across the fells and know I should be outside taking my flock from the hay meadows to grow some crop in July. Writer? Or farmer? You have to choose, or try an impossible balancing act.

So most nature or countryside writing is penned by people of leisure, wandering daydreamers, with the time and headspace to turn what they see, smell, hear and feel into words. They often write beautiful things, but the stories of the people that work on the land often don't get told. We only get rare glimpses into their lives. A. G. Street invites us into the life of a yeoman tenant farmer and his experiences from the turn of the twentieth century through to the Great Depression of the 1930s. It tells an important story about a farming world disappearing.

The first section of the book, set in Wiltshire, tells the story of the older, settled farming system into which A. G. Street was born. The middle section covers his three-year working adventure in Manitoba in Canada, immediately prior to the First World War. The final section tells the story of his return to Wiltshire, to try and find a viable future for his family's rented farm as the old farming systems and economics crumbled away.

A. G. Street knew, and acknowledged in the book, that his farming story loses some charm as it progresses. In truth, he is saying that farming in that period lost some of its charm and its innocence.

This is the story of a man surviving a changing world, and looking back fondly on much that he had lost. You sense him at the end of the book surviving the modern world, rather than loving it. He ends his story clinging to a farming life, like a man clinging to a raft after a storm.

Shattered. Tired. Partly defeated. He is trying to be a survivor. I know the feeling.

Through the book we follow A. G. Street's story from the solid ground of an ancient, largely local and fixed farming system, through to a more modern, globalised and commodity farming system. Because of this change, it is an important historical document about that period in the history of farming.

A. G. Street is a wonderful guide to that journey, disarmingly modest and

humble. Quite happy to cast himself as a daft green-behind-the-ears youth, and willing to admit his own failings and prompt questions about what worked and didn't in the farming world of his childhood and adulthood. The book is savage in its self-criticism at times.

As you read it you can sense A. G. Street searching for meaning and sense in what he had experienced. As a farmer you are always compromised by, and part of, the processes that change the landscape. Even the poet John Clare worked as a paid labourer in the gangs that fenced and enclosed his beloved commons. As a farmer you cannot step outside the changing landscape, you are, for better or worse, standing in it, playing a role in it, buffeted by the winds.

*Farmer's Glory* might be dismissed as rustic nostalgia, because it is in places nostalgic. But it is more than that. Some of its appeal is undoubtedly because it offers us a portrait of a landscape and its people that is familiar, safe and ordered. The book has an elegiac quality to it, summed up by the title of Part Three, 'The Waning of the Glory', when we are invited to mourn for something unspecified, something simpler, something lost: another kind of England. It is hard not to be seduced by the idea of a more innocent world and its people.

*Farmer's Glory* was published in 1932, as the American economy was reaching its lowest ebb of the Great Depression and amid widespread political unrest. Millions of people were starving in a man-made political famine in the Ukraine. Hitler was appointed German Chancellor in 1933. In Manchuria, genocide was taking place. Britain's ability to control or shape world events was fast becoming a memory. World-changing trouble was brewing everywhere, changes happening that few could understand. Who wouldn't want to escape into the past for a few hours reading about the gentle farming folk of A. G. Street's youth?

His book was probably quite old-fashioned even at the time it was written. It is reminiscent of the Georgian poetry before the First World War, but a little bit more knowing. It also reminds me a little of Edward Thomas's poetry, and scenes like those of the ploughmen in 'As the Team's Head Brass'. It has echoes of Siegfried Sassoon in it, his *Memoirs of a Fox-*

*Hunting Man*. The First World War is almost entirely unmentioned, but it is there in the shadows.

It chronicles a lifetime of change and leaves the reader feeling irredeemably sad at what was lost. But *Farmer's Glory* uses nostalgia cleverly, because this is a gently revolutionary book. It masquerades as a few homely tales about his farming life, but in spirit it says something very powerful and troubling. It finds a homely way to say that things may be getting worse, not better, and that what is considered 'progress' is in many ways regressive in the English landscape. It offers the rural life of his childhood as a counterpoint to the modernity crashing out of control in the 1930s. It raises questions about what kind of farming we might want, what kind of society, and what constitutes a good life. It asks whether economic change, in an earlier age of growing globalisation, is inevitable like some force of nature, or something that can be shaped and tamed.

It is in all this a deeply Virgilian book, and like Virgil's *Georgics* uses its rustic innocence as a device to make a deeper point about the world.

The other thing that strikes you about *Farmer's Glory* is that it tells another story than that of farming in England. In 1911, after a falling out with his father about his place in the pecking order on their farm, A. G. Street struck out for a farming adventure in Western Manitoba in Canada. I find this part of the account fascinating in a historical sense, a rare account of someone traversing the Old and New World farming systems. After the first part of the book describes an Old World farming system, the middle section about Canada offers a glimpse of what would destroy it.

When he arrived in Manitoba he became part of a New World agricultural system that would ultimately sweep away the Old World farming systems of his youth. This was a different kind of farming. A landscape defined by the scarcity of labour, a shortage of working men and women, where the scale was massive, and where there was no sentiment about replacing the old ways and the old people with more horses, or the coming agricultural machines. His account is one of railways, boxcars, teams of horses, electric lights, engines, immigrant labour, credit, cheap

land in large quantities, commodity production in a kind of high-stakes game with the wilderness and the extreme weather.

His account is largely about clearing and ploughing virgin prairie, which we would call wilderness. They are only fleetingly mentioned, but this was land that had prior, but largely dismissed, claims of ownership by the first peoples of North America. It was also a wild landscape in the process of being tamed, including shooting wolves and other predators. But A. G. Street was a young man of his time, swept along in the currents of his day.

This was land that could be cleared on an industrial scale, and could be tamed and farmed in ways unimaginable in an ancient farming landscape like Wiltshire. Farming governed by purer capitalist ethics, by the drive for efficiency and profit. It is in stark contrast to the system he grew up in, where profit often happened, but almost accidentally as a by-product of the tried and tested old systems and practices. This was a 'blank slate' to start farming again on. Nothing could stop the new farming. It could stretch from horizon to horizon. This Canadian landscape could be divided up into 'sections' with ruler-straight edges, simple perfect squares on a map. To a boy from Wiltshire used to a crowded, messy and evolved landscape full of conservative vested interests, stubborn people and traditions, it must have been a heady, thrilling kind of farming freedom, and A. G. Street is honest enough to admit he found it so.

It probably felt like the future. In many ways it was. But we know it was a future with problems and huge societal and environmental costs. *Farmer's Glory* is a precious snapshot of a twenty-year period of farming and landscapes changed forever.

It makes a damning point about the death of the older English farming system of rotation of crops and livestock, as it was replaced by newer systems that claimed to free farming, and mankind, from historic constraints and limitations. He was there as the new world of highly mechanised farming was taking off, with new machines, new artificial nutrients, new chemicals, and new medicines beginning to revolutionise farming. The agrarian tradition has always been sceptical of change and deeply nostalgic, and A. G. Street is too. He sees this change, and tells us why it feels wrong to him.

In A. G. Street's writing, nostalgia is a radical thing. The best pastoral writing has always been political with a small 'p'.

This old book oozes a very English scepticism about the changes he has witnessed. It isn't, as he disarmingly claims in the introduction, just a matter-of-fact neutral tale about changes to farming in his lifetime. It passes judgement but so gently and charmingly that you barely notice. *Farmer's Glory* is shot through with observations and tales about the modern being beaten by the older ways, about the arrogance of the 'new' and the robustness and good sense of the 'old'.

His book floats an old Virgilian idea that long held a place in the minds of the English, that maybe a quiet farming life might be a good one. That maybe we sold out to industrialisation and the dark satanic mills, and that we yearn to get back to those fields somehow. It is an idea most recently showcased in the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, as an integral part of our 'national mythology'. We are not entirely sure we like what we have become, nor whether the deal we took was a good one.

There are limits to nostalgia, of course. If my children fall ill I want the medicine of 2017, not the medicine of 1910. I wouldn't want to inflict the poverty, sexism, class hierarchy, homophobia, or racism of that age on any of my friends or loved ones.

But if I wanted to bring back the disappearing field birds of the British countryside then I might well find some of the answers in the dynamic, rotational mixed farming of the past. If I wanted to work out how to farm without oil, antibiotics, wormers, pesticides and artificial nutrients then, again, the past holds some of the answers.

I think A. G. Street was grappling for answers, caught between the paternalism of his youth and the free-market pragmatism learned in the prairies of Manitoba. He ends the book with sadness, noting how his own farm employs only a fraction of the people that worked it twenty years earlier, and describing a new-fangled farming system that many of the people in the community don't trust or like, which cultivates the land into a monoculture of grass – a 'green desert' – and leaves farm economics precarious and volatile.



This is really a book about the modernisation of farming and the cheapening of food as farmers were forced to ‘specialise’, pursuing ‘efficiencies of scale’.

A. G. Street seems deeply sceptical at the end of his story about the future he has lived to see. It is a very polite, humble and gentle form of scepticism, and is more powerful for it. The same economic processes are changing our landscapes today, with even greater force, and violence, and many of us suspect that they make the world worse in many ways, and not better, for people and nature. We, like A. G. Street, are left wondering whether things in our landscapes really have to be like this.

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