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Tomorrow: the Country

By H. E. Bates

IF I look back on my immediate family history I see two pictures, in reality two sides of the same picture, of the English country scene.

I see on the one side a family in which for me the important figure is my maternal grandfather. I see him beginning his active working life as a boy of six, arriving at four o'clock each morning in the kitchen of a big stone farmhouse shaded by an immense walnut tree that must have looked to him, as it afterwards looked to me, like the largest tree in the world. I see him trying to drink the day's first pint of home-brewed beer; I see him doing the long day's work. He scares crows from the corn with a clapper, minds sheep in the frozen turnip field, rides the nag from field to farm to fetch harvest beer in wooden bottles, drives cattle to a market nine miles away and walks back sustained by nothing but a penny bun and sometimes not even the bun if the penny were wanted very much, takes the last sack of wood home down the twilit lane where in his fancy ghosts come up to meet him from the river. I see him taking *largesse* according to the custom of centuries, binding himself at the hiring fair, touching his hat to bearded parson, hunting squire and shooting doctor. I see him at dame school, learning to read but unhappily, and obviously because time is too short, not to write. I see him observing a score of country festivals: Plough Monday, Shrove Tuesday, May Day, Oak Apple Day, Harvest Home, Lammas Day, feasts and fairs. I see him making and hacking down fences still being put up under Acts of Enclosure. I see him standing at the gates of the Hall for dripping—and very good it was—and soup and bread. I see him walking seven miles to court my grandmother and seven miles back. I see him watching bare-knuckled prize-fights on frosty autumn mornings. I see him looking across the valley of his childhood and thinking of any town of thirty miles away as beyond the edge of the world.

The other picture is not much different, except that it concerns a woman. In this picture I see my great-grandmother on my father's side. Here, too, as with my grandfather, there is a large family. There are fourteen children and arithmetic is not one of the things essential to bringing them up; for my great-grandfather's wage is fourteen shillings a week exactly. To this fourteen shillings is added a welcome half-a-crown,

stipend of the village lamp-lighter. In winter other extras may be added: shirts can be made at sixpence each. In summer there will be gleaning and the end of harvest will see in the back-yard enough corn to keep fourteen children from going hungry. On Sundays there will be clean ribbons and straight backs, and Sunday school and chapel, then Sunday school and chapel again. There will be much hymn-singing and Calvinistic prayer. On Mondays there will be hard work again, and more hard work, and still more hard work, and no one knows what tears in the night, or what heart-ache, so that fourteen children shall not go hungry or dirty or shirtless or without a chance to improve themselves.

From these two pictures, in which poverty and labour, tradition and custom keep the boundaries of the same tiny world from expanding over roughly the same period of time—the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties of the last century—there emerge two beautiful figures. Neither poverty nor labour, rigid custom nor servitude, succeeded in making either my grandfather or my great-grandmother servile, embittered, degraded or commonplace. Each emerged from the same sort of life, in the same time, in the same village, as English rural aristocrats of the finest type: gentle, decent, honest, fine to look at, upright and proud.

There are two interesting things about these lives. The first is that they were not the lives of a privileged class—you may read something of that sort of life, in the same period, in the Diaries of Kilvert or the delightful memoirs of the Sitwell family—or of two specially gifted people. They were the lives lived by tens of thousands of the country poor: hard work, little education, much devotion to prayer and custom, an equal devotion to class and respectability. The second is that the whole fabric of them has vanished. There no longer remains, in England, any but the shadowiest part of the system of which they were so typical. Greater than any Act of Enclosure, than the repeal of the corn laws, than the Reform Act itself, a revolution has swept them away.

Whatever we have to say about the country life of our time, and still more of the country life tomorrow, must—whether we like it or not—take this revolution into account. It is without any doubt at all the greatest and swiftest revolution to which the countryside of Great Britain has ever been subjected. For the life lived by my grandfather and great-grandmother in the second half of the 19th century did not belong simply to that time; it cannot have changed very much, except for enclosures, the introduction of the threshing machine and the coming of railways, since the day of Waterloo; it had far greater affinities with the 18th century than it had with our own day, and the early part of the 18th century, as Lord Ernle has pointed out, differed very little in its conditions from the life of Shakespeare's day. Except that Wesley had partly replaced the sawing parson, enclosures the open field system, railways the stage-

coach, the picture of rural England in the seventies and eighties had plenty in common with the pictures drawn by Crabbe, Clare, Miss Mitford, Goldsmith and diarists such as Torrington and Woodeforde in the 18th century.

The picture of Torrington, in 1794, going to the same church as that in which my grandfather sang as a choirboy and afterwards retiring to eat lamb and green peas in the same public house where he afterwards sang for very different reasons, is one which belongs as naturally to the day of Queen Victoria as it does to George III. The farthing rush-light whose cost Torrington notes with such tartness in the hotel-bills of his travels was still in use in my grandfather's day; the pack-horse, the barge and the carrier's cart were for him, as for Torrington, still the commonest means of transport; even a stage-coach still came clattering through on its long journey between London and the north.

Such changes as there were in this life were slow, gentle, unspectacular. They still left town and countryside apart. Even the revolution produced by the railways, extending as it did over practically the whole of a century, did less than might have been expected to bring rural and urban life closer together; it left great rural areas to which there was still, as throughout the centuries, no access except by foot, horse and cart. Changes as they came caused no disruption. Spread over the years, the oil-lamp replacing the rush-light, the gas-lamp the oil-lamp, the street-light the lantern, the light they caused dazzled and blinded no one.

It is impossible to say what would have happened if this process—what Professor C. S. Orwin has called 'the process of steady evolution through the centuries'—had continued. Even a century of increasing industrialism and mechanisation had had, as we have seen, little effect on rural life; mechanisation, except through the steam threshing engine and the binder, had done little to replace, in its main industry, agriculture, the traditional work of hand and horse. Right down to the nineties of the last century Irish itinerant labour still provided, as it had done since Stuart times, much of the hand-power in English harvest fields; and when it did not provide it the English labouring family did; whole families emigrated into the fields for six or eight weeks in the late summer to reap or tie and shock and carry the corn, often under a contract system and often leaving the staple industries of the district to do so.

This reversion to something like the life of the pre-Enclosure peasantry was especially strong in the newly industrialised Midland districts, where the brick factory, the terra-cotta chapel, the mission hall of corrugated iron and the aspidistra in the bay-window were together bringing the new English town to a level of uniform tastelessness that was as hideous as it was depressing. Glory to God and glory to the machine helped to raise between them, at this time, an altar whose ugliness is still with us in

countless streets from London's East End to Tyneside, in a thousand little towns that had formerly been nothing more than villages for a thousand years.

SOMEWHERE about 1896 there appeared the first signs of the revolution that was not only to change rural life as it had never been changed before and was not only to bring rural and urban life closer together in England than they had ever been before but was actually to revolutionise the ways of living—and dying—of more people all over the earth than had ever been affected by any one event in history. This revolution was not a violent act of national reform, nor a new theory of science propounded by a 19th century Newton under a new apple tree, nor a dazzling discovery in medicine to make the life of man healthier, happier, saner and less anxious here on earth. Nor I suppose could one person in a million have guessed, when the first absurd motor-driven carriages chuffed down the streets of Paris and Berlin, London and New York, that man had put into his own hands anything but a new and amusing and rather ridiculous mechanical toy.

To go from one place to another without an animal to provide the power of the vehicle: this was no new thing. Ships or trains had already done so, and with power and speed. But water and the steel track limited their range. A man could own a boat, but he needed water to sail it on; the very rich could own a private railway. But the carriage driven by motor power had few limitations. Its track was every road and lane, however remote; it needed neither anchorage nor termini; its potentialities, both for pleasure and use, both for creation and destruction, were to be proved within twenty-five years so enormous as to be fantastic. Within fifty years—that is down to the hideous moment when I write this under a blaze of shell-fire and the menace of a motor-driven robot bomb that is the newest measure of man's scientific inhumanity to man—it was to become so ultra-fantastic, in its speeds and variation and ingenious uses, as to outstrip even the dreams of scientific fiction writers like Wells. Indeed it is only in the fantasies of Wells, who has written so trenchantly and prophetically of this revolution in communications, that we get anything like a conscious prophecy of the world to come.

Up to the beginning of the Great War of 1914–1918 there was no great sign, in rural England, of this revolution. But by the time the war was over the scene was ready. The internal combustion engine, in the form of private car and public bus, then began to do two things. It began to open up the close and narrow communications of the English countryside, even to their remotest ends, almost ruthlessly; and it began to liberate the countryside, as it were, from itself, from its solitudes, its sleepiness, and

its traditional separation. It began to make a mockery of distances that had seemed to our grandfathers discouraging and impossible. But it also did something else: a complementary thing. It started to liberate the town. For if the countryside had been in a bondage of its own, the traditional and long-accepted bondage of that narrow and simple life whose cataclysmic ditherings were so well observed by Miss Austen, the town had become and was still becoming the victim of a monstrous and impossible bondage whose beginnings were equally well observed and lambasted by Cobbett.

We shall see from Mr Harrisson's essay on the town, which follows in this book, how the town had been growing; we can see for ourselves, all about us, the form its growing so often took. In the mean hell of east or south-east London, in the drab acreage of Manchester or Birmingham, in the teeth of red brick or slate eating their way outward from countless little towns everywhere: all these were forms of that urban bondage that was growing tighter and tighter. And from all of it the motor car, through the countryside, offered a new and simple form of escape.

We have heard a good deal about the modern drift from the countryside: a thing of which nevertheless practically every writer on the countryside was also complaining bitterly during the 18th and early 19th centuries. Yet it was really the opposite drift, the drift to the countryside, that was the phenomenon of the immediate post-war years and of all the years between the wars. It would be wrong, and dangerous, to try to say that it was a permanent drift. Some part of it attained permanence: the week-end cottage, the house in the country, the dormitory house for the business man travelling daily to the office in town. But a greater part of it was casual and sporadic. Nevertheless it was enormous. Every week-end, every summer evening, every holiday, it liberated thousands of people from town and city and gave them the free air of fields and hills. It took them away from work, done either at desk or machine, that had little of the creative touch in it; it took them away from streets that looked practically the same in June as in January; it took them away from the established pattern of urban conduct. On Sundays the churches were emptied; the countryside was filled. The symbolic communion of bread and sacramental wine became exchanged for the picnic of ham and beer on the country grass. After these excursions the life of the town was taken up again, only to be relinquished again as soon as the family car could be taken out for an hour. In short, town life and country life began to be fused, to be known by each other, to be complementary to each other, as never before.

This fusion was and is, as I see it, a good thing. Such a statement is, I fear, nothing but purest black heresy to that school of thought which

gives all the virtues to the country and all the vices to the town. This school of thought would have the future of the countryside based, as it used to be based, on the principle of the village as a self-contained economic unit; on the handicraft, the spinning-wheel and the hand-loom, the brewhouse and the muck-heap, the frolic and the maypole; as a return to that life when, as Professor Orwin has said, 'men were wholly engaged in the primary stages of the production of all the necessaries of life,' a life where everyone, almost entirely through lack of communication, had to help clothe himself, feed himself, amuse himself and as often as not doctor himself from the cradle to the grave. This school of thought seems further to argue that town and country are mutually antipathetic, that they seek to take something away from each other, that the effects of town education, town habit, town amusement, town manufactures are wholly bad in their effect on the countryside. It would wish the countryside to keep itself—and all its inestimable and lovely benefits which it praises so highly—to itself; it views the revolution of the last fifty years, the swift breaking down of the barriers that once kept urban and rural life into severely removed compartments, as a dreadful and lamentable thing.

I take entirely the opposite view. This fusion of town and countryside, of which we are going to see a great deal more as soon as the Second World War is over, seems to me one of the few hopeful things in a fairly hopeless world. Many things in that world, notably and quite wrongly the aeroplane, are held to the particular discredit of the internal combustion engine; I hold at least this to its credit. For agriculture is still the foundation of rural life, as it is still one of the foundations of a healthy national life. And agriculture is, in spite of its mechanisation, its politics, its economics, and its controversies, the most purely creative of all industries on earth. If therefore a greater number of people can come into contact with the life of which that industry is the heart so much the better. For what are too many of us now concerned with? Not with the creative side of life, but the destructive; not with the shaping of materials, whether of stone or words, wood or paint, glass or clay, into some sort of creative form, but with forces that are praised in ratio to their ability to blow the human body, whether of child or woman or man, into a greater number of pieces. We live in a world where men are knighted not for performing the eternal miracle of raising ten thousand seeds from one seed or of producing a calf from the belly of a cow, but for the monstrous achievement of inventing a 12,000 lb. bomb; in a world where the purest creative act of all, the production of children, remains unachieved by countless women out of the simple and not unreasonable fear that these same children will be blown to smithereens before they can reach maturity or even speak a word.

I do not say that a course of country living, a sudden devotion on the part of us all to agriculture, will cure these monstrous tendencies. What I do say is that soon, as soon indeed as millions of men and women can put the business of war behind them, the need for taking part in a creative and not a destructive existence will be a hunger so enormous that we shall witness, for the second time within the century, a rediscovery of country life and the countryside. For agriculture has this virtue also: it is not only creative but it confers the benefits of that creation on millions who never take part in it. Its works and its enormous pattern are there for all of us to see, to smell, to take delight in. It gives its legacy freely and steadily and beautifully and bountifully, over and over again, for generations and the centuries, to the whole community.

Very important it is, therefore, that such an industry should be kept healthy, that it should attract men to it, that its standards of material living should be kept human and high. Equally important is it that the townsman should be brought closer to it, to be made aware of its importance to him, of its deep value in the lives of us all. For this reason I cannot help hoping that the day when rural life and town life were kept from each other in tight and even mutually contemptuous departments is finally over. For not only is it true that country life has wonderful things to give to the town; but the town in turn has good and important things to give to the country. Man cannot live fully by the beauty of landscape alone, and most of us like the best of more than one world. The town can make life richer and fuller for us by its social breadth, by art such as drama, cinema and music which necessarily flourish where audiences are closely within reach, by light and power, by shops and restaurants, by libraries and lecture halls, and by its greater opportunities for the exchange of ideas and for knowing ourselves. Town and country are in fact really indivisible, complementary; they are the two sides of the coin.

Urban life, as Mr Harrisson says, is of course inevitable. But what sort of urban life? The grim legacy of Puritanism plus Calvinism plus Victorianism which was so much a part of the picture with which this essay began? The mean messy planlessness of our Birminghams and Manchesters and Leicesters: the chromium-fronted multiple shop, the concrete monument of departmental store and office block, the rows of suburban villas compromising between city and country? Or the garden city—the city filleted of the bone of vice and pleasure, drained of drama, dehydrated? Or the town newly planned, architect-drawn, committee-approved and laid down like a piece of patterned linoleum on a selected site?

With the possible exception of the last, we shall have them all. For not only is urban life inevitable, but for us, of our generation, the material

shape of it is also inevitable. We cannot escape the urban legacy; we cannot destroy its enormity at one blow or instantly rebuild it nearer to the heart's desire. The changes we impose on it are scrappy, external, accomplished by the slow and often apathetic process of translating the wishes of the citizen into the action of the municipality. We cannot sweep the urban past away, however hideous or unlovable we think it, and have left the clean surface of an original design. Yet in the country this is possible, and we see it happening. The material rural legacy is scattered and light, and so much of the pattern of it is the pattern of nature that we see and delight in its renewal every year. There descends on it a miracle of transmutation, each summer and spring, that the town never knows. So in one sense the revolution in the country appears greater, in another sense less than in the town. For if we look back at the picture of country life with which this essay began we shall find practically nothing of the social part of it remaining now, in our time; yet the background of corn and grass, river and woodland, furrow and hedgerow, is practically the same. That background is a pattern which even bombing cannot destroy. It is a life of which we can say, not as Mr Harrisson says of urban life 'we have to go on with it' as if meaning 'we have to put up with it,' but that we want to go on with it. In a world that seems to divide itself more and more into creative and destructive elements, violently opposed, more and more of us—and not only in Britain but in America also and in countries wherever industry has thrown up huge and graceless urban centres of life—are looking to it for the whole or part of life.

Is it of some significance, in fact, that these huge and impossible urban centres, which we find so hard to break down and rebuild by slow process of their being 'scheduled for demolition' have at last begun to produce the means of destroying themselves? Have we really come to the point where materialism, of which the 19th and 20th century town is the monument, has at last discovered, in the bomb, a swift way of self-destruction? It is said that in war, when human life is being destroyed very rapidly, the need for reproducing the species shows a vigorous increase, thus restoring the balance, with something over. Is it a crazy thought that as we flee to hide from the bomb we run to the place where life is most creative, where re-creation is most rapid and regular and above all certain? Are we really witnessing, not symbolically but actually, the destruction of an era, and being drawn back, with corresponding force, to a life that is closer to earth, the element which sustains us? It is thought that fits in well with Mr Harrisson's observation, expressed elsewhere, that rather than study the habits of the savage in the jungle, we should study ourselves, in this jungle of our own.