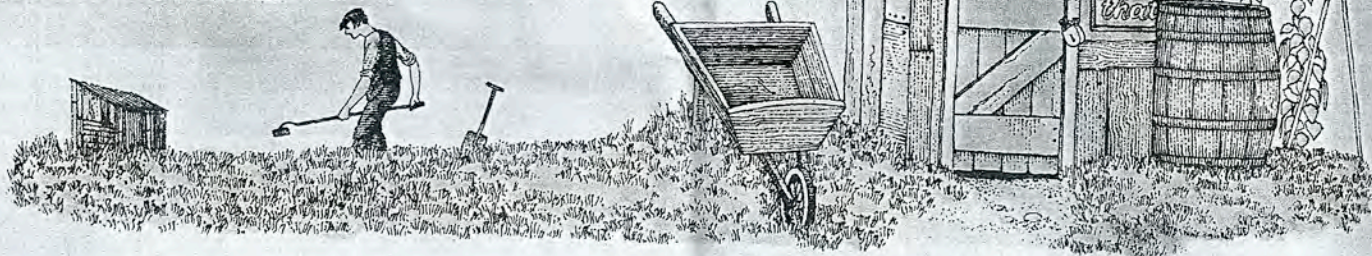


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A Countryman Remembers by H. E. Bates

# GOD'S LITTLE ACRES



In my boyhood, sixty years ago, the business of making boots and shoes in my native Northamptonshire had not long ceased to be, like the Swiss watch-making industry, largely a home industry. Up to the latter years of the nineteenth century, shoemakers worked in little shops in back-yards, at benches strewn with files, awls, knives, hammers, wax thread, sprigs, lasts, tacks, leather and so on, with a little oil lamp to give light on winter evenings and a little coke stove to give warmth. Many of these men were fine craftsmen, working with great skill and consequent pride. My own maternal grandfather was such a man, so skilled that he was invariably singled out for any special orders that came down from London.

Shoemakers have long been noted for their staunch independence. One expression of this was that they never worked on Mondays. On that day they ceased to be urban workers and took refuge in the countryside: fishing, walking the dog, rabbiting, coursing, poaching, watching prize fights in far secluded woods and so on. When they took to work again they often laboured far into the night and then at weekends boozed away most of their hard-earned gains.

By the time I was a schoolboy most of this was a thing of the past. Factories and machines had taken over. But the pull of soil and countryside is strong and a great many of these shoemakers, though now chained to factories—and pretty hideous factories they were—remained countrymen at heart. Practically every one of them cherished a plot of earth, an allotment, charmingly known in my part of the Midlands as 'the garden field'.

Often on fine summer mornings they would be up at dawn to put in a couple of hours or more among the potatoes, carrots, beans, peas, turnips, cabbages and the few flowers that always accompanied them, before doing their day-long stretch of factory imprisonment.

On summer Saturday afternoons wives joined their menfolk with baskets of tea and 'having we teas' either inside or just outside the little tool huts became an inevitable part of the Saturday ritual. Later in the evenings you would see the shoemakers and their wives sauntering home—'soodling' is the excellent Northamptonshire word for such a gentle method of progression—carrying the spoils of the earth: vegetables, rhubarb, bunches of sweet william, sweet peas, dahlias, marigolds and so on.

In time, inevitably, just as factories had succeeded the little shoe-making back-yard shops, a revolution came to the garden fields. After the Second World War a generation had sprung up that didn't care much for the chore of tilling the earth. It preferred eating peas out of cans. It was also discovered that the garden fields, once hired or bought for a mere pittance, could now be sold for small fortunes for

development. Where this didn't happen neglect spread an ugly hand, so that the once neatly-ordered plots became nettle beds, truly melancholy graveyards.

But change keeps rearing its own obstinate head and now, it would seem, another revolution is under way. The allotment, the garden field, would seem to be coming back into its own. Vegetables, like so much else in our modern world, are atrociously expensive and it would also seem that not everybody, even the young, likes peas out of cans. A lot of people, like me, prefer them out of pods, just as they like the crisp crunch of a newly-gathered lettuce as opposed to a handful of limp green flannel from a shop. So the pull of the land, the soil, manifests itself again, as in fact it does in a score of other ways in our mechanised, noise-ridden world. Inevitably we long to have back the things we destroy and of nothing is this so true as the good mother earth.

During the course of writing these words I had a letter from an old Northamptonshire shoe-hand now living in South Africa. He doesn't speak of revolutions, either in Africa or this country, specifically, though he does so by implication.

The time of which he writes, seventy odd years ago, was that very period of revolutionary change when the back-yard shoe shops—they might well have been called sweatshops since many of them employed small boys known as 'sweaters'—were giving way to machines. His father was a hand-laster; his mother did hand-stabbing. At 12½ he was afforded the special dispensation of being allowed to take an exam that, if passed, would allow him to leave school and go to work. He ran errands at six shillings a week. The woman he was to marry also took the exam and then worked in a shoe factory, knot-tying, at four shillings for a fifty-two hour week.

My own mother did the same kind of job, and at this period my father was a half-timer—half the day at school, half at work.

He too, after the shoe-making tradition, felt the strong pull of the countryside. That pull took him on infinite long walks into the country, to woods and fields and brooks and rivers, and it took me with him, trotting behind him on my small legs trying to keep up. It often seems to me that this prevailing passion for the countryside was something more than a mere safety valve. It helped to keep men sane in a world that offered more and more enslavement to machines.

Hence the importance of those little plots of earth, God's little acres, and there is something very satisfying in the fact that they are enjoying a revival. Life, thank Heaven, is not lived entirely out of cans and packets.



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