

Colin Ward

The Child in the Country

1988

Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgements	3
Defining the Country Child	7
1. Images of Childhood	7
2. 'Village Children'	12

Introduction and Acknowledgements

Ten years ago I wrote a book, *The Child in the City*, about the relationship between urban children and their environment. The book was, to my mind, more a celebration of resourcefulness than a catalogue of deprivations, but when it was discussed at meetings and conferences of teachers and social workers there was always somebody who would comment that, while we had a whole library of studies of the city child, rural childhood was examined only as a historical phenomenon or through rosy nostalgia.

Assumptions of the city deprivation were based on an unstated comparison, it was claimed, with some ideal country environment, yet there were many country children who grew up in conditions of disadvantage and deprivation, unnoticed just because of our automatic assumptions about rural life. I took these observations seriously but would never have been able to pursue this theme but for the award of the Susan Isaacs Research Fellowship endowed by the Memorial Fund set up by her friends to commemorate Susan Isaacs (1885 -1948), the psychoanalyst who founded the Department of Child Development in the University of London Institute of Education in 1933.

I have thus every reason to be grateful for the affection that Susan Isaacs won from her colleagues and students in the academic world of child development, and to Audrey Curtis, the honorary secretary of the Susan Isaacs Memorial Fund Trustees, and senior lecturer in Early Childhood Education in the department that Susan Isaacs founded.

For me, the most endearing thing about Susan Isaacs was the way in which she rose to the opportunities that came her way, such as the opportunity to run the Malting House School in Cambridge in the 1920s onward. An unlikely full-page advertisement in the *New Statesman* in the 1924 sought an Educated Young Woman to conduct the education of a small group of children as a piece of scientific research – ‘someone who has considered herself too good for teaching and who has already engaged in another occupation’. It seemed absolutely made for her, and she used this chance for close and direct observation of her children’s behaviour. Characteristically, she similarly seized the opportunity to serve as an ‘agony aunt’. ‘Ursula Wise’ was the reassuring pseudonym she chose in the columns of the *Nursery World*. Nowadays, no doubt, any of us would gladly accept a commission to dispense advice in this way and to be instantly put in touch with the worries and preoccupations of readers about child-rearing, but in those days this was not one of the activities thought appropriate for academic researchers. There was a conscious effort in her work to bridge the gulf that separates the world of the professionals and the experts from that of the ordinary parent and teacher. This was epitomized in her book *The Nursery Years* which went through

numerous printings after its first appearance in 1929. My copy is dated 1965, so here was a book with an unusually long life-span, particularly in a world where there are fashions in child-rearing as in everything else.

The one occasion in recent history when city and country children were brought face to face with each other, as were their teachers, was in the wartime evacuation. Susan Isaacs put together the book known as *The Cambridge Evacuation Survey*¹ and her biographer Dorothy Gardner, praising her 'realistic common sense', remarks that, 'She did not hold a meticulously severe view of the need for rigid methods of taking evidence but said that the sincerely held opinions of teachers were well worth gathering and that even less precisely taken evidence would get them nearer the truth than anything else they could get at that stage of the problem.'²

I share this view. The discussion of a topic as amorphous as that of the country child, when we are by no means certain that in modern Britain such a distinctive category exists any more, rests heavily on 'the sincerely held opinions of teachers.' Notoriously teachers see only one aspect of any child's personality, but they do encounter a great many children. And since few rural teachers have spent a lifetime in rural schools, they are able, and are often very willing, to make comparisons. Susan Isaacs and her colleagues were almost unique at the time in carefully seeking and publishing the opinions of children themselves.

When I wrote about the child in the city, I became aware that in modern Britain the distinctions between city, suburb, small town and village grow less tenable as the years go by. In what sense is the country-dweller who commutes to the city, and whose children commute to the nearest urban school, to be thought of as a villager? Similarly, is the experience of the child in the Orkney Islands or on Anglesey anything like that of the child living in the green belt of a metropolitan city?

One thing that I have learned is that the children of what seem to be remote places are especially anxious to remind you that they do not spend their lives chasing sheep but follow the same fashions and play the same tapes as their urban counterparts.

Also, there is much more in common in the experiences of children in affluent families, rural or urban, than in those of rich and poor children in the same city or in the same village.

Again, I became aware when writing about city children that boys experience, explore and exploit their environment much more than girls do. This is even more

¹ Susan Isaacs, Clement Brown and R.H. Thouless, *The Cambridge Evacuation Survey* (Methuen, 1941)

² D.E.M Gardner, *Susan Isaacs* (Methuen, 1969). A more recent study of her work is Lydia A.H. Smith, *To Understand and to Help: The Life and Work of Susan Isaacs* (Associated University Press, 1985)

true in the country. The range of activities thought appropriate for boys is far wider than for girls, who are also subject to a wider range of parental prohibitions.

The lives of rural children scarcely conform to our stereotypes. Perhaps the most ironical thing is that, among that minority of families where the breadwinners are full-time farm workers, forty per cent have incomes which fall below the supplementary benefit entitlement level. Farm workers of both sexes are the lowest-paid workers in the country. They were during the agricultural depression and they were all through the boom years of the industry, now said to be at an end.

Brian McLaughlin, in his unpublished final report to the Department of the Environment on *Deprivation in Rural Areas*, points to the implications of the fact that in Britain the poor, once the greater part of the country population, have become a minority group living amidst comparative affluence. 'As a result, many of the policies which have been devised for rural areas (e.g. transport, housing, employment etc) tend to reflect the desires and wishes of the majority, rather than the needs and aspirations of the poor.'³ It is assumed that there are fringe benefits for the rural worker, or that living in the country is cheaper, but McLaughlin finds that over eighty per cent of poor rural workers have no fringe benefits at all and that for lack of transport poor families are dependent on those village shops that remain and are more vulnerable when they close, while, 'A common explanation given by the better-off households for not using local shops was their high costs.'

The lives of rural children are full of paradoxes and surprises for the adult observer with opinions formed by the usual preconceptions carried over from the past. But a closer look at the realities of the country childhood might enable us to reduce its disadvantages and make the most of its opportunities.

I am much indebted to all those parents and teachers who have shared their recollections, experiences and impressions with me, and who have given me the opportunity to talk to children up and down the country, in and out of school. I thank the children themselves for their candour and tolerance.

I must make grateful acknowledgement to the authors and publishers of all the works quoted in the text and listed in the notes. I owe a particular debt to the work of recent researchers in this field, Adrian Bell, David Clark, Gwen Dunn, Humberside Playing Fields Association, Allan Kennedy, Brian McLaughlin, Simon Nicholson and Alan Sigsworth.

Extracts from *The Peewit's Cry – A Norfolk Childhood* by Camilla Campbell are quoted by kind permission of the author. Extracts from *The Old Century, and Seven More Years* by Siegfried Sassoon are quoted by kind permission of Messrs Faber and Faber.

³ Brian McLaughlin, 'Rural Rides' in *Poverty*, No. 63, 1986

It is a particular pleasure to thank Viv Arkell, John and Jean Bulman, Della Chapman, Chris Culpin, Corianne Gretton, Sue Griffiths, Keith Offord, Erica Pomerans, Kate Riddleston, Molly and Ray Stiles, Tim and Shirley Ward.

Colin Wars

Defining the Country Child

1. Images of Childhood

The wild anemones in the woods in April, the last load at night of hay being drawn down a lane as the twilight comes on, when you can scarcely distinguish the figures of the horses as they take it home to the farm, and above all, most subtle, most penetrating and most moving, the smell of wood smoke coming up in an autumn evening, or the smell of the scutch fires; that wood smoke that our ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago, must have caught on the air when they were still nomads, and when they were still roaming the forests and the plains of the continent of Europe. These things strike down into the very depths of our nature. . . .

These are the things that make England, and I grieve for it that they are not the childish inheritance of the majority of the people today in our country.

Stanley Baldwin, *On England*, 1926

English literature abounds in the kind of autobiographical novel in whose opening chapters our young hero (for it is seldom a heroine) is seen in the ancient small-town grammar school, daydreaming of the woods and fields, while his elderly teacher is droning on about Latin declensions. Once let out of school, his real life begins – wandering by the river banks and up through spinney and copse to the hilltops, observing nature with a learning eye and absorbing the wisdom of shepherd and gamekeeper, forester and farrier, from the lovable old poacher with a heart of gold and from the scary old hermit whose tumbledown cottage is really a treasure trove of country lore and bygones.

In the urban equivalent our hero is rather lower down the social scale. Once released from his stern mentors in the board school, he is out and down the street like a shot, everybody's friend in the market, besieging the old lady in the sweetshop on the corner, begging orange boxes from the greengrocer, nicking coal from the railway yard, all as a rough-and-ready apprenticeship to the life of the city.

Years later (for such stories are always set in the past) these stereotypes have become successful citizens, and when they unbend to the young graduate seeking the hand of their favourite daughter, they usually confess that, 'I was educated in the School of Life', The point that they and their creators are making is the truism that our homespun philosophers invariably call it, is no substitute for Life Itself.

The stereotypes are, of course, intensely literary in origin. The first owes a great deal to Wordsworth and his immense influence on the British imagination, with the long shadow of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's cult of the 'natural man' behind it, and the second belongs to a picaresque tradition stretching back through Dickens to Defoe. Teachers of English have for years sought to democratize and update these stereotypes of the separateness of urban and rural experience. Think of the whole series of excellent books with which vast numbers of children have been made familiar as they became set books for examination purposes. I am thinking of texts like Flora Thompson's evocation of Victorian rural childhood in *Lark Rise*, Alison Uttley's Edwardian *The Country Child*, Laurie Lee's idyll of the years after the First World War, *Cider With Rosie*, and Ronald Blythe's assemblage of his neighbours' recollections in *Akenfield*. Excellent books, all of them, in their examination of the relationship between children and their environment, but I often wonder if their popularity among teachers is precisely because they promote a picture of a *purified identity* of rural childhood, uncontaminated by urban influences which muddy and confuse the image.

In exactly the same way, travellers returning from Polynesia report that secondary school pupils there are obliged to read Margaret Mead's *Growing Up in New Guinea* and *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the fruit of her research in the nineteen-thirties, to learn about the world they have lost.

Moralists and educators, all through history, as Raymond Williams has entertainingly illustrated,⁴ have polarized the country and the city as environments for children and have concluded that, however much the city may be a necessary provider of civilized life for sophisticated adults, nature is the only true teacher and that there is something 'authentic' or 'organic' about rural childhood. A century and a half ago the American essayist Emerson grumbled that, 'I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children and I wish city facility and polish. I find with chagrin that I cannot have both.'⁵

However, above a certain social level, parents took it for granted that their children should have both urban and rural experiences, though with a strong bias for the rural. The rich, in bringing up their children, have always been able to mingle urban and rural experiences. The possession of a town house as well as a rural estate, whether we are thinking of Imperial Rome, eighteenth-century England or nineteenth-century Russia, ensured that the children of the family gained experience of both, as well as of the drama of the transition between the two. It was expedient for the patricians that their children, or at least their sons,

⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973)

⁵ Emerson's journal quoted by Morten and Lucia White *The Intellectual versus the City* (mentor Books, 1964)

should gain the experience of negotiating with gamekeeper and bailiff as well as with gaming-house keeper and tailor. It was expedient that their daughters should achieve marriageability and avoid the attributes of hoydens or tomboys by being 'finished' in town before 'coming out'.

It was a matter of comfort and convenience that the gentry should desert their estates in wintertime, even if only for those little winter assembly towns where they built themselves houses for the season when the country roads were impassable. The sons and daughters rehearsed their urban roles and urban manners in these small towns. Jane Austen watched them. Least fortune was those children of the affluent who lived at home in the country, were sent off to a boarding school also in the country. The ordinary urban experience passed them by, just as it passed by the children of the rural poor, until the girls were sent into service and the boys emigrated in search of work.

Not only public schools and preparatory schools but borstals, reformatories and approved schools were deliberately situated in the country, far from the temptations and stimulations of the city, for rural childhood was especially valued. 'Rousseau's Emile,' wrote Herbert Read, 'seems to have been taught in a well-furnished country house, surrounded by a well-cultivated garden with all variety of natural phenomena within easy reach. That may be in ideal environment for the unfolding sensibility of a child – personally I believe that it is.'⁶

The country may have been the ideal child-rearing environment for those who had the choice, but all through the nineteenth century the 'drift from the land' drew poor country-dwellers into the cities and the new industrial towns, out of economic necessity, in a migration as dramatic as the gigantic movements of population into the exploding cities of Africa, Asia and Latin America today. And in Britain then, just as in the Third World today, if the parents were asked what they hoped to achieve by exchanging rural for urban poverty, they would reply that they had taken this decisive step for the sake of their children's future.

It is very interesting that, in the Victorian city, social problems were blamed on the 'riff-raff' of the population that was moving in from rural areas. It was thought that such areas were exporting the thriftless, unstable, footloose elements in their village population to the towns. At the very same time, observers of rural life were lamenting that the able, enterprising, stable, bright and adventurous members of the rural population were those who emigrated, leaving behind those who lacked these qualities. The diminishing rural population was thought, in the crude social Darwinism of the period, to consist of the unfit, since the movement away from rural life exemplified the survival of the fittest.

⁶ Herbert Read, *The Education of Free Men* (Freedom Press, 1940)

Victorian medical authorities insisted that the unhealthy cities depended on a continual migration from the country and would wither away without it. The city attracted ‘the pick of the youth, both physically and intellectually’, according to Dr P. Williams-Freeman, and thus encouraged ‘a survival of the unfittest by elimination of the best’. For him, ‘The child of the townsman is “bred too fine”, it is too great an exaggeration of himself, excitable and painfully precocious in its childhood, neurotic, dyspeptic, pale, and undersized in its adult state, if it ever reaches it.’⁷ For Dr J. Milner Fothergill, ‘They are certainly more affluent than their country cousins; but they are town dwellers, and therefore a doomed race. Without infusions of new blood in a few generations they die out; while their country cousins remain a fertile folk.’⁸

These opinions continued to be held well into the twentieth century and were linked with the view that the country was the ideal environment for the child. When the wars in South Africa revealed the poor physical condition of recruits for the Army, a Government report concluded that, ‘With a view to combatting the evils resulting from the constant influx from country to town, the Committee recommends that every effort should be made by those charged with the conduct and control of rural schools to open the minds of the children to the resources and opportunities of rural existence.’⁹ And a report on delinquency underlined the Wordsworthian view that Nature was the only sound moral instructor: ‘Recent developments have clearly shown that not only does juvenile delinquency increase in direct proportion to population, but it has also shown that the further a growing child is removed from health-giving influences of the country, the more frequent are his lapses into mischief and crime. One of the most apparent effects of town life upon the character of a child is seen in a lack of reverence. Country dwellers, from an early age, are witnesses of the works of Nature, and therefore their subconscious mind is imbued with a spirit of reverence. . . .’¹⁰

Reginald Bray, a progressive member of the London Country Council’s education committee, found that London children lived in a disturbing atmosphere of restless excitement because, ‘The concentrated power of the human element, when exerted to its full extent, creates the Hooligan; but it breeds excitement and dislike of any restraint in all alike who inhabit a large city,’ just because, ‘A mass of impressions are hurled at the observer, a thousand scenes sweep by him; but there is nothing to hold them together, nothing to produce a sense of order, nothing to give a perception of similarity.’¹¹ And the German educational

⁷ P. Williams-Freeman, *The Effect of Town Life on the General Health* (P. S. King, 1889)

⁸ J. Milner Fothergill, *The Town Dweller: His Needs and Wants* (Longmans, 1889)

⁹ *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, 1904

¹⁰ Mary G. Barnett, *Young Delinquents: A Study of Reformatory and Industrial Schools* (Methuen, 1913)

¹¹ Reginald Bray, *The Town Child* (P.S. King, 1907)

philosopher Karl Weidel urged rural primary school teachers to make strenuous efforts to keep their pupils on the land: 'In contrast to the peasant, he argued, the urbanite was enamoured of intellect and skeptical of authority. He was a nomad, both physically and emotionally, and his character suffered from superficiality and inner emptiness.'¹²

But not every observer of the contrast between urban and rural childhood saw it in these terms. The nineteenth-century Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy was a sophisticated aristocrat, who yearned to be a peasant. Before he set up his village school on his estate at Yasnaya Polyana, he gave himself a grand tour of the public education systems of Germany, France and Britain. He reached the conclusion that, 'Education is an attempt to control what goes on spontaneously in culture: it is culture under restraint.' He illustrated this from his observations in visiting Marseilles, where he went to every school attended by working people's children and had long conversations with teachers and pupils in and out of school. He witnessed mechanical rote learning of the kind taken for granted in those days, found that pupils could not read any other books than those they had studied and that, 'Six years of school had not given them the faculty of writing a word without a mistake.' He convinced himself that the schools of Marseilles were exceedingly bad.

Then Tolstoy drew a very significant conclusion: 'If, by some miracle, a person should see all these establishments, without having seen the people in the streets, in their shops, in the cafés, in their home surroundings, what opinion would he form of a nation which was educated in such manner? He certainly would conclude that that nation was ignorant, rude, hypocritical, full of prejudices, and almost wild. But it is enough to enter into relations and to chat with a common man in order to be convinced that the French nation is, on the contrary, almost such as it regards itself to be: intelligent, clever, affable, free from prejudices, and really civilised.'

How could this be? 'I involuntarily found an answer in Marseilles, when after the schools, I began to stroll down the streets, to frequent the dram-shops, *cafés chantants*, museums, workshops, quays and book-stalls.'

The city, he found was itself an education: 'Whether this education is good or bad is another matter; but here it is, this unconscious education which is so much more powerful than the one by compulsion; here is the unconscious school which has undermined the compulsory school and has made its contents to dwindle down almost to nothing. . . . What I saw in Marseilles takes place in

¹² Karl Weidel, 'Stadt und Land in Kulturphilosophischer Beleuchtung' 1927, quoted in Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought 1820-1940* (Manchester University Press, 1985)

all the other countries: everywhere the greater part of one's education is acquired, not at school, but in life. There where life is instructive, as in London, Paris, and, in general, in all large cities, the masses are educated; there where life is not instructive, as in the country, the people are uneducated in spite of the fact that the schools are the same in both.'¹³

Tolstoy provided an eloquent recommendation for the city as an automatic educator and, as a countryman, did not believe in Shakespeare's books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything'. In fact, he reinforces a stereotype that is as old as urban life itself. The town child is knowing, quick-witted, streetwise and learns from every day's new encounters. The country child is slow, innocent and even bovine. Words like clodhopper, bumpkin, yokel and hayseed were invented to epitomize this stereotype. Like the opposite mythology, it similarly permeates literature, from the Roman Petronius to P.G. Wodehouse (who remarked that, 'About the London child there is breezy insouciance which his country cousin lacks.') Marx and Engels, in the Communist Manifesto, wrote a famous passage about 'the idiocy of rural life' and, of course, only villages have village idiots.

2. 'Village Children'

When we were nearly there we were surprised to hear the noise of boys shouting and chasing each other. Usually there was no one there except ourselves. We looked at Mother and she said, 'It is just the village boys, darlings, it's Saturday, you know. And they like playing in the woods just as much as you do, after a week of school.'

Camilla Campbell, *The Peewit's Cry – A Norfolk Childhood*, 1980

When Britain entered the nineteenth century, the vast majority of its children were the children of farm labourers. By the end of that century, although Britain had become a predominantly urban nation, farm labourers were still the biggest single occupational group in the country. At that time there were two million farm workers. Today the farm labourer as such has virtually disappeared, since the 160,700 workers of 1984 were almost all skilled in handling the complex machinery of modern agriculture. (They were supplemented at certain times in the year by another 156,000 casual or part-time workers.)

¹³ Leo Tolstoy, 'On Popular Education' (1862) in *Tolstoy on Education* (University of Chicago Press, 1967)

Only a small minority of children living in the country today are the sons and daughters of farm workers. The 'village children' have disappeared from history. But they were scarcely ever in it, even though they were once the majority of all children. Peter Laslett, commenting on the swarms of children surrounding our ancestors, as well as on their pitifully low expectation of life, remarks that these crowds of children are strangely absent from the written record: 'There is something mysterious about the silence of all these multitudes of babies in arms, toddlers and adolescents in the statements men made at the time about their own experience.'¹⁴

Only our modern interest in working-class autobiography, local and oral history, has excavated the personal experiences of this silent majority of country children, buried in the bluebooks of a dozen nineteenth-century royal commissions, school logbooks and parish records, and in the handful of autobiographical writings of exceptional children of the labouring poor like the poets John Clare, born in 1793, and Robert Bloomfield, born in 1766. Village children were figures in the background of the vast literature of rural life, part of the picturesque scenery, the deserving poor who were objects of charity for the big house or the vicarage.

The perception of rural childhood that fed mythology for half a century was Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village*, published in parts between 1824 and 1832 and continuously reprinted to this day.

Of country boys she wrote, 'In general they are open, spirited, good-humoured race, with a proneness to embrace the pleasures and eschew the evils of their condition, a capacity for happiness quite unmatched in man, or woman, or girl. They are patient, too, and bear their fate as scapegoats (for all sins whatsoever are laid as matters of course to their door), whether at home or abroad, with amazing resignation; and, considering the many lies of which they are the objects, they tell wonderfully few in return. The worst that can be said of them is, that they seldom, when grown to man's estate, keep the promise of their boyhood. . . .' She does not stop to ask why, and goes on to describe Joe, a poor twelve-year-old: ' . . . as may be conjectured from the lamentable state of that patched round frock, and the ragged condition of those unpatched shoes, which would encumber, if anything could, the light feet that wear them. But why should I lament the poverty that never troubles him? . . . He works at yonder farm on the top of the hill. . . .'

. . . The little damsel gets admission to the charity school, and trips mincingly thither every morning, dressed in the old-fashioned blue gown, and white cap, and tippet, and bib and apron of that primitive institution, looking as demure as a nun, and as tidy; her thoughts fixed on button-holes and spelling-books

¹⁴ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (Methuen, 1965)

– those ensigns of promotion. . . . Then at twelve the little lass comes home again, uncapped, untipped, unschooled; brown as a berry, wild as a colt, busy as a bee – working in the fields, digging in the garden, frying rashers, boiling potatoes, shelling beans, darning stockings, nursing children, feeding pigs; – all these employments varied by occasional fits of romping and flirting, and idle play according as the nascent coquetry, or the lurking love of sport, happens to preponderate; merry, and pretty, and good with all her little faults. It would be well if a country girl could stand at thirteen. Then she is charming. But the clock will stand at thirteen. Then she is charming. But the clock will move forward, and at fourteen she gets a service in a neighbouring town; and her next appearance is in the perfection of the butterfly state, fluttering, glittering, inconstant, vain – the gayest and gaudiest insect that ever skimmed over a village green. And this is the true progress of a rustic beauty, the average lot of our country girls; so they spring up, flourish, change, and disappear.¹⁵

Mary Russell Mitford's style must seem archly sentimental to people familiar with the social history of the period, but her account of the village children of Three Mile Cross, between Reading and Basingstoke, stresses truths which remained constant for a century after she wrote. The boys were destined to hard labour from childhood onward, resulting in the characteristic stooping stance and gait of Hodge, the Victorian farm worker, while the girls were equally inevitably to go into 'service' at thirteen or fourteen, first in a nearby town and then in the wider world. From childhood, they had a share of domestic tasks, and their early departure from the overcrowded cottage made more room for the younger children. Miss Mitford was a pre-Victorian and, in her account, girls under ten could behave as indecorously as the boys, something that was not considered correct in Flora Thompson's village girlhood fifty years later, when 'Victorian ideas, too, had penetrated to some extent.'¹⁶

And however patronizing Miss Mitford's approach, the village children were to her sentient humans rather than part of the landscape. Nothing could be more suddenly chilling than that passage in Alison Uttley's idyllic *The Country Child* when her *alter ego* Susan Garland overhears a remark as the congregation files out of the Christmas service: ' "What a very plain child that Garland child is! Positively ugly," said Mrs Drayton to her husband. Susan gasped and stood still. The world was filled with sorrow. The gleaming snow was dulled, a cloud swept over the sun, and the sky drooped. Mrs Drayton turned round and saw the girl's

¹⁵ Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village*, 1824 – 32 (George Harrap, 1947)

¹⁶ Flora Thomson, *Lark Rise* (Oxford University Press, 1939)

startled eyes. “Will you please ask your mother to send to shillings’ worth of eggs?” she said stiffly, and passed on like a queen.¹⁷

Or the encounter from Winifred’s girlfriend in the inter-war years, when, ‘One autumn day, I nipped down the field in the hope of finding a walnut under a tree in the corner. As I searched, a huntswoman rode up. She reined in her mount at the side of me, and in a loud, assured “country” voice, called to a male rider a few yards: “Do come and have a look at this. Isn’t it quaint?” She started at me with such insolent amusement that I realized I was the “it” referred to . . .’¹⁸

Although people chose to look back on village life as that of a closely knit community, it was in fact a series of quite separate communities, based on unquestioning deference. Sunday Schools began to penetrate the lives of village children from 1785, ‘National’ schools from 1811, and ‘British’ schools from 1814, and as early as 1792 William Godwin was warning that, Public education has always expended its energies in the support of prejudice; it teaches its pupils, not the fortitude that shall bring every proposition to the test of examination, but the art of vindicating such tenets as may chance to be established . . . This feature runs through every species of public establishment; and, even in the petty institution of Sunday schools, the chief lessons that are taught are a superstitious veneration for the church of England, and to bow to every man in a handsome coat. ‘¹⁹ His forecast was proved correct by every account of the schooling of the Victorian village child. Pamela Horn, in her study of their experiences, reports how,

From time to time, too, the appearance on the road of a carriage belonging to the squire or some other village notable would jerk them back to their best behaviour. As the carriage passed it was customary for the children to draw hastily to one side and to salute the passengers in an appropriate manner. Thus at Langley Burrell in Wiltshire, Miss Constance Pearce, who was the daughter of the local brewer, remembers that at about the turn of the century, the children, who attended the village school were still ‘taught to bob to the Squire’s family, or Sir John Dickson’s family, who lived in Pewhill house, when out on the road.’ (The Squire was a Mr Ashe, and it is perhaps indicative of the awe in which he was held, according to an earlier observer – Francis Kilvert – at the beginning of the 1870s, ‘One of the Langley Burrell school children being asked, Who made the World? Replied, Mr Ashe.’) Similarly attitudes seem to have been displayed in a number of other parishes, and at Helmingham in Suffolk a girl who omitted

¹⁷ Alison Uttley, *The Country Child* (Faber & Faber, 1931)

¹⁸ Winifred Foley, *A Child in the Forest* (BBC Publications, 1974)

¹⁹ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 1792 (Penguin Classics, 1976)

on one occasion to curtsy to the Squire's lady, was apparently caned in school for this the next day.²⁰

These attitudes took an immense time to die out. Stan Holmes, a farmer labourer's son, now a self-employed businessman, remembers from his school days in the 1930s that, 'When the squire or farmer came along you had to stand and raise your hat to him. Same for the vicar and schoolmaster. You had to respect everybody for what they were. They had what we call a "pecking order" and you had to treat people as such. If you didn't — look out!²¹ The social distance between village children and their betters was enormous and virtually unbridgeable. Thus, drawing on the recollections of two clergymen's daughters (born in 1900 and 1879 respectively) , John Burnett records that, 'At higher social levels, contacts with "the poor" were deliberately avoided or carefully controlled. Margaret Cunningham, daughter of the rector of Cranleigh, was forbidden to talk to "the poor children" who attended the National (i.e. Church) School, though they offered to share a skipping rope which "I would have liked to have accepted as I was no mean skipper." Another clergyman's daughter, Ludivina Jackson, was allowed limited contact with " the unfortunates" when she became a Sunday School teacher at the age of ten, but here the relationship was clearly one of superior and inferior, not of equals.'²²

Village children lived in a culture of deference and dependence, and few of their 'betters' worried about their isolation from the changing outside world. The rector of Great Leighs in Essex remarked quite casually in his diary that, 'It is characteristic of the village mind that it is too feeble to accept a simple fact.'²³

In the mid-1920s J.W. Robertson Scott, founder on the magazine *The Countryman* wrote a once-famous book, *England's Green and Pleasant Land*, about the real state of rural life behind the self-indulgent ruralism. He was bold enough to remark that, 'As one meditates on the matter one comes to see that the thing that is wring with a large proportion of the agricultural class is something that is wrong from its childhood. . . .' and he declared that, 'To starve the junior schools of our hamlets is to cut at the roots of our hopes for the reformation of rural England.'²⁴

A decade earlier than Robertson Scott, in 1912, the book *Change in the Village* was published. It was by George Bourne, also known as George Sturt, whose books

²⁰ Pamala Horn, *The Victorian Country Child* (Roundwood Press, 1974)

²¹ Richard Scase and Robert Goffee, *The Real World of the Small Business Owner* (Croom Helm, 1980)

²² John Burnett (ed.), *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (Allen Lane, 1982)

²³ James Munson (ed.), *Echoes of the Great War: The Diary of the Rev. Andrew Clark 1914 – 1919* (Oxford University Press, 1985)

²⁴ J.W. Robertson Scott, *England's Green and Pleasant land*, 1925 (Penguin, 1947)

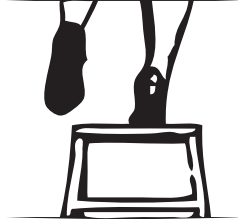
have been known to generations of English teachers as accurate and sympathetic accounts of traditional village life and work. The author was a school teacher in rural Surrey before inheriting his family's wheelwrighting business. His book was an elegy for what he saw as a peasantry destroyed and demoralized by the enclosure of common land and by the short-lived period of 'high farming' which followed. He says, 'What was really demolished in that struggle was the country skill, the country lore, the country outlook; so that now, though we had no smashed machinery, we have a people in whom the pride of life is broken down; a shattered section of the community; a living engine whose fly-wheel of tradition is in fragments and will not revolve again.'

Bourne's final chapter, which he called 'The Forward Movement', reminded his readers that, 'Educational enthusiasts are busy; legislators have their eyes on villages; throughout the leisured classes it is habitual to look upon "the poor" as a sort of raw material, to be remodelled according to the leisured ideas of what is virtuous or refined, or useful, or nice; and nobody seems to reflect that the poor may be steadily, albeit unconsciously, moving along a course of their own. . . .' One agency for this change was the despised popular press, penetrating into poor rural homes. 'There is no saying,' Bourne concluded, 'what its offspring may not achieve, once they get their powers of intellect awake on modern lines and can draw freely upon the great world for ideas.'²⁵

Today there are so few 'village children' in the old sense among the inhabitants of villages that we send today's children from the village to interview the old inhabitants with cassette recorders to learn what life was like in the days when the 'village community' still existed. The old people oblige, reminiscing about the way children made their own amusements, the excitement of fairs and day trips, the way their mothers struggled to maintain families on pathetically small incomes, but they also remind us of incredible hardship, squalor and exploitation well within their own memory. Sometimes they reflect upon the meaning of their own memories. Mr G. F. Seymour recalls that among the common sights of his childhood were ' . . . Children running about in all weather without boots and stockings, children in dirty ragged clothes, children who stood with their noses pressed to the panes of the baker's shop window . . .', and he goes on to stress that, 'We were of course, one of the richest countries in the world. Other old people, looking back, may agree that it was a pity that those riches couldn't have been more evenly distributed. . . . The "good old days" are created by our memories and imaginations. The present time is really the good old days, if only people can be made to realize it, and not blind themselves to the facts of how tough life can be . . .'²⁶

²⁵ George Bourne, *Change in the Village*, 1912 (Penguin, 1984)

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 22, 2013



Colin Ward
The Child in the Country
1988

Scanned from original

²⁶ G.F. Seymour in June Jones and Julia Thorogood (eds.), *When I Was a Child* (Ingatestone: Sarsen Publishing for Age Concern (Essex), 1985)