

The Blue Rode Well in the Corn

Akenfield, Portrait of an English Village, Ronald Blythe, Penguin, 287pp.

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Mrs. Sullivan, fifty-five, headmistress, feels that ‘people have some odd ideas about village children’ but thinks it a boon that ‘they aren’t influenced by what they call admass’.

Christopher Falconer, thirty-nine, Big House gardener, recalls that ‘if people were sitting on the terrace or on the lawn, and you had a great barrow-load of weeds, you might have to push it as much as a mile to keep out of view’. ‘In the summer’, shares ‘Tompo’ Dix, seventeen, farm-worker, ‘we like to get our motor-bikes out and zoom around.’ He bridles playfully when Bruce Buckley, seventeen, forge apprentice, blurts that ‘there’s a girl in Saxmundham who would be easy for Tompo but he won’t look at her.’ Pondering the current state of farming, Raynor Creighton, master at the Agricultural Training College, admits that ‘everything isn’t rosy’. ‘Wet as a ditch, day in, day out’, laments Gran of Lana Webb, her grand-daughter, twenty-three, chronically incontinent.

There is something almost biblical about how the stories accrue in Ronald Blythe’s *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village*, first published in 1969. Although the arrangement isn’t strictly two-by-two, the inhabitants of the village (itself pseudonymous but by no means fictional) appear before the reader grouped according to their kind. The section titled ‘God’ fields six tellers, ‘The Survivors’ and ‘The School’, five apiece. Jubal Merton bears ‘The Wheelwright’ banner alone. Fittingly, grave-digger William Russ does likewise with ‘The Hour of Death’. Mostly, their voices are quiet, meditative, although Marjorie Jope, retired district nurse, can be forgiven a moment of stridency when recalling that, contrary to popular myth, the elderly of the village were neither honoured nor cared for: ‘In fact, when they got old, they were just neglected, pushed away into corners. I even found them in cupboards!’ In sum, what emerges is one of the most compelling books of its kind: partly a sociological study, though one born of the courtesies of extended conversation; partly an understandable need to record the ‘thisness’ of life in Blythe’s native Suffolk; and partly an example of how, from the 1950s onward, personal histories were increasingly allowed to remain in the possession of their owners rather than being woven into a grand narrative of alien

preconception.

Concerning this last, and although very much its own work, *Akenfield* could be described as a leisurely documentary, in the mould, though understandably not of the pace, of what had been produced since the late 1950s by a medium still testing its wings, television. For the BBC, pioneering documentary maker Denis Mitchell had already created *In Prison: Strangeways* (1957) and *Morning in the Streets* (1959), advertised as ‘an impression of life and opinion in the backstreets of a northern city in the morning’. Building on the work of such as Mitchell, Jeremy Sandford’s *Cathy Come Home* (1966) dramatized one possible fate for those who had not been chosen to rinse kaftans and polish beads in readiness for the Summer of Love the following year. Where *Akenfield* departs from these, of course, is in the matter of time and space. Visual and aural documentaries are necessarily selective; they have an allotted running-time and, as any programme-maker knows, that running-time can chafe. *Akenfield* unrolls in the manner of the countryside in which the village lies, ‘folded away in one of the shallow valleys which dip into the East Anglian coastal plain’. Documentaries inhabit their spaces restlessly: there may be (and, in Mitchell’s case, there were) extended scenes of close, rich focus on subject and place. But these cannot be dwelt upon: *Morning in the Streets* is not *Two Characters on Their Doorstep*. The next scene and character must be established, and the next. *Akenfield* capitalises on one of the book’s key advantages over the compound of sound and image: its characters can be pondered, their words—variously evocative, bewildered, jokey or plain-spoken—evaluated and re-evaluated. The reader can turn back the pages. In this sense, Blythe’s work echoes the spirit, though not the rococo embellishments, of the Victorian triple-decker novel.

This is not to imply that *Akenfield* occupies a lone place in the written word. Literary enquiries into the condition of England, comprehensive or selective, factual or fictional, extend from *The Canterbury Tales* through Augustan picaresque novels, Cobbett’s *Rural Rides*, certain works of Dickens, Disraeli and Mrs. Gaskell (actually labelled ‘Condition of England’ novels) and on to the surveys of H.V. Morton, Orwell and J.B. Priestley, not omitting Craig Taylor’s *Return to Akenfield* (2006), part homage to Blythe’s work, part investigation into how the village and its environs have fared since being captured in their mid-Sixties moment. Beyond these, a template for *Akenfield* offers itself in *A History of Myddle, Shropshire*, authored by Richard Gough between 1700 and 1702, which commences, like *Akenfield*, with a ‘dramatis personae’ listing names and occupations.

Akenfield differs from all its predecessors, however, in terms of the process through

which it defines itself as an enquiry. Blythe's method is bottom-up rather than top-down. Through its myriad voices, its locations, its attitudes—wistful or suspicious—to the wider world beyond, the village happens to him and thence to us. H. V. Morton's *In Search of England*, first published in 1927, continues to fascinate, not least because it is one of the first such ventures to utilise the new servant of his age and master of ours, the motor-car. But it conveys a sense of scenes and people occupying or subverting pre-concocted visions and fancies. In Cornwall, 'the first sight that pleased me was a girl with a shingled head driving a cow with a crumpled horn. I said to myself then that I was in fairyland!' Later, however, Warrington reneges on nursery-rhyme promise:

At Warrington I heard the clap-clop of clogs; at Warrington I saw mill-girls with shawls over their heads; at Warrington I smelt for the first time the characteristic aroma which permeates the industrial towns and villages of Lancashire—fried fish and chips.

The rhetoric suggests an erring schoolboy whose name must be reiterated, the blacker to paint his transgression. In his *English Journey* (1934), J.B. Priestley seeks to be more even-handed about the differing tribe-lands of England. Sometimes he succeeds; at others, prior assumption gives him an easeful piggy-back. In the Black Country,

The places I saw had names, but the names were merely so much alliteration: Wolverhampton, Wednesbury, Wednesfield, Willenhall and Walsall. You could call them all wilderness, and have done with it.

Nor does fashion soothe his disenchantment. The women of the wilderness do their best for him but to no avail:

The shawls were like those that the weavers used to wear in my own town, but our women had worn their shawls over their heads. Here, however, they wore caps as well, and looked as outlandish as the place they lived in.

Like Morton and Priestley, Blythe offers comment and evaluation: *Akenfield* is not a play for uncontextualised voices. The book's different sections—'The Survivors', 'To Be A Farmer's Boy?', 'Officers and Gentlemen', 'Four Ladies' and the rest—are prefaced or punctuated by character descriptions of at times Shavian detail. And it would be untrue to say that such descriptions are always wholly neutral. Any judgements that appear, however, are controlled,

fleeting and in any case borne out by the next villager to, as it were, take the microphone. For example, Blythe sets the scene for Leonard Thompson, seventy-one, retired farm-worker, by stressing that his experiences illustrate a particular convergence of history and economics and were shared by many:

Len is also an extraordinarily interesting survivor of Britain's village lost generation, that mysterious army of horsemen, ploughmen and field workers who fled the wretchedness of the farms in 1914. The army had provided—along with the railways—an escape route for many years before this, but it was the First World War which swept Len and his contemporaries off the hated land to conditions which forced the thinking countryman to decide to halt a system of degradation when they returned.

Emotive such words as 'survivor', 'wretchedness', 'hated' and 'degradation' might be, but Len—speaking in that reflective, unhurried manner characteristic of all but *Akenfield's* incomers—gives credence to their use. Post-war improvements were small at first, often more a matter of kind than money, but welcome nonetheless:

There were a few more privileges around than there used to be. They'd let you take a rabbit or two, for instance. Before 1914, if you'd caught a rabbit, my God, the world would have come to an end! The sack was the least you'd get. We felt that there must be no slipping back to the bad old ways and about 1920 we formed a branch of the Agricultural Labourers' Union.

The 'bad old ways', however, returned in altered form, a result of the endless caprices of supply and demand. 1921 saw the onset of the slump, with farmers and men alike facing a situation which, after the union-inspired hopes of the previous few years, must have seemed like degradation redoubled:

The farmers became broke and frightened, so they took it out on us men. We reminded them that we had fought in the war, and they reminded us that they had, too! So it was hate all round.

Elsewhere in the village map that *Akenfield* gradually unfurls, and in time and occupation, one of the 'Four Ladies' is introduced thus:

Classic English lady, kind, energetic, Vice-Chairman of the Women's Institute, Rural District Councillor. Opens her garden to the public in July. Arranges flowers in the church—and would scrub the whole place out if she found it necessary. Strict Conservative.

Here, it could be argued, emotiveness is covert—and wrong-foots the reader. Stinting on subject and verb, more in the style of police notes than pen portrait, this introduction seems to have 'You know the type' as its subtext. What the reader comes to realise, however, is that such terse phrasing is a warning against easy stereotypes. The lady in question, Marian Carter-Edwardes, fifty, is all of the above but also a Samaritan, and her words reveal a sensitive awareness that, in such a role, she must venture into a very different world from that of open gardens and flower arrangement—and one which constantly challenges her to examine her own preconceptions:

I make tea, offer a cigarette and gossip. It is a kind of priming. Once they start talking I shut up. [...] You never tell anybody anything of what you have heard. And usually, to be quite honest, it isn't worth telling! The things which can worry people to the point when they seriously consider killing themselves often turn out to be small—trifling. You think, *is that all?* But the worry has assumed enormous proportions to the sufferer and you, the outsider, aren't there to belittle it but to break it down.

Other villagers seem to offer more latitude for judgement. Persis Ede, odd-job man, forty-eight, doesn't appear to talk directly to Blythe and the reason soon becomes clear: his entire life, it seems, is *sub judice*, with past transgressions including 'poaching, nicking lead, failing with his hire purchase, fighting, driving uninsured, dozens of little illegalities'. His latest offence, under investigation and thus obliging Blythe to stay at arm's length, is intimacy with Linda Malyon, fourteen, 'a stringy, brown-faced, notch-haired girl'. She mothers her siblings, her own mother having "gone off to London". Everyone who disappears has gone off to London', while her father belittles her determination, in the midst of chaos and moral slippage, to continue with her schooling: 'read, read, read—you must want your bloody head seen to!' Persis' wife has reported the intimacy, less from wifely anger—she knows she can do nothing with Persis—than from rough tenderness towards Linda: 'Linda is a grub grown-up girl now and she'd get into a muddle. It's got to stop'.

The description of Linda notwithstanding, Blythe largely steps back here, leaving the narrative to those involved, commenting only when background detail is required. As a result, the reader gains as great a sense of the villagers' reaction—and Akenfield's own moral compass—as they do of the case itself. Linda's 'Welfare lady', for example, evinces benign exasperation—

'I'm not pregnant,' [Linda] reminds her.

'But Mr Ede—don't you understand—he'll go to prison.'

'Whose fault is that?'

'Yours—partly.'

'I'm sorry for my part, then.'

—and her feelings find further voice in the juxtapositions that surface in her report:

They have intercourse about twice or three times a week and she has never refused him. Patient, when not involved with girls, is said to be a good father and generous with money if he has any. Mrs Ede said that she would never think of leaving him, nor would she ever

More than any other sections, it is those dealing with Akenfield's personal lives—Marian Carter-Edwardes' Samaritan work, the Persis Ede case, the nursing memories of Marjorie Jope—that remind the reader that *Akenfield* is simultaneously new and old, fresh and compassionate in tone yet also, now, an historical document. As so often, period-specific references enforce this sense. Motor-bikes or scooters are the vehicles of choice for the restless young. Lana Webb, imprisoned by her incontinence, has 'a facsimile autographed photo of Ringo Starr' in her handbag. To take her mind off her husband's impending court-case, 'Mrs Ede stays inside and paints the entire house from top to bottom, with Radio Caroline turned up so high that she wouldn't hear a knock if it was made with a hammer.'

Below these butterfly-pin details, however, other concerns are as insistent as they were long before—and, Craig Taylor's work shows, as they are now. The vagaries of the farming life are as pressing as ever. New technology is introduced, changes in stock and land-use are implemented with a mixture of empiricism and hope. Still Akenfield's world pivots on the old axis, good year / bad year, with its attendant dichotomies, old ways / new ways and, especially for the young, staying / going (at least to Ipswich if not London). Agricultural wages, before as then, then as now, exercise a number of Blythe's speakers: 'It is

a good thing in this village,’ says David Collyer, twenty-nine, forester and Labour Party organizer, ‘that the women are able to find so much part-time work. The money helps to offset their husbands’ low farm wages’. Terry Lloyd, twenty-one, pig-farmer, works the staying / going dichotomy into his reflections:

Then you have another problem—labour. Although labour is being cut and fewer and fewer men are needed to work the farms, it is still hard to find them. They are all going away from the land. An intelligent young married chap simply can’t afford to be a farm-worker.

The siren lure of factories, higher wages, year-round work, is acknowledged on all sides, sometimes ruefully, sometimes in the spirit of ‘well, good luck to them’. It is as though the first social impact of the Industrial Revolution, mass desertion of land for burgeoning town, is still being played out in Akenfield and its like, albeit in a small, slow-drip manner, as leisurely in its way as the stories revealed on Blythe’s pages.

There is poetry, too, in *Akenfield*. An actual poet, unnamed, has come to live there, but there are other words beyond his that arrest the attention. This isn’t a matter of providing a party-piece for the gentleman with the tape-machine. The remarks are often casual, unthinking, and all the more charged for that. Gregory Gladwell, forty-four, blacksmith, has a lyrical rule-of-thumb for choosing apprentices: ‘If you know the home, you already know the son’. When Duncan Campbell, sixty-six, first came from Scotland to farm in the area, ‘My wife and I, we missed the hills and the weir-running streams’. ‘Christ, that was a summer and no mistake!’ confides Michael Poole, thirty-seven, orchard-worker, of his first time—unlooked-for, public—with a woman. Jubal Merton, sixty, wheelwright and blacksmith, remembers fondly the standard colour for the body-work of wagons: ‘Always blue. The blue rode well in the corn’.

‘The Great Listener’—thus was a 2012 *Archive on Four* programme titled, about Tony Parker, who did for oral history on radio what Denis Mitchell did on tv. To quote Jubal Merton, the epithet rides just as well on Ronald Blythe’s name. To listen is to invite, accept, provide thinking space—to celebrate the richness of lives otherwise folded away behind social nicety, tied to degree of acquaintance. To listen is also to respect, as Blythe does unfailingly in *Akenfield*—and, with wry self-deprecation, when speaking to Craig Taylor:

Once, when I was speaking with Blythe in front of his fireplace, he paused and looked out of the window. ‘Imagine what the farmers who lived here would think of this,’ he said. ‘Us doing nothing but talk all afternoon.’