

THE BETTERMENT OF HODGE.
Talk on *Hodge and his Masters*.

This Talk was given by Mr. Cyril F. Wright to the Richard Jefferies Society at the Wyvern Arts Centre, Swindon, on Monday February 4th 1980 – the centenary year for the publication of Richard Jefferies' book published by Smith, Elder in 1880.

From 7s. a week wages in 1880 to perhaps a £100 a week in the next round of pay negotiations seems an incredible advance for Hodge in a hundred years. When he wrote *Hodge and his Masters* Richard Jefferies could never have envisaged it, nor the circumstances that have brought it about. The general impression of the agricultural labourer to which Jefferies subscribed was that he was 'slow, solid, sure and stupid,' but that if he had enough enterprise to step out of the lazy inclinations of his class, find himself a thrifty, tidy, industrious wife, and get the utmost yield from his cottage garden, he might manage quite well on the ordinary agricultural wage of the district. And in those days wages varied in different parts of the country, being higher in the north, especially in the proximity of industrial cities where the wages were competitive.

Hodge and his Masters was written in weekly instalments for a London paper *The Standard*, at the onset of the farming depression of the 70's and 80's.

The importation of foreign wheat and chilled meat were the main factors, and things were made worse by an unprecedented succession of cold winters and springs, and wet summers. A few statistics:¹

1875 First shipment of grain from U.S.A. and first shipment of chilled beef.

1878/9 One of the coldest winters of the century. Jefferies refers to the severe conditions in several of his books.

1879. Very wet summer - many farmers ruined. Stormy winter. In Dec. the Tay Railway Bridge disaster. Price of wheat 43/10d quarter. (in 1854 it had stood at 74/8d quarter.

1880 A good year for weather.

1881 Worst snowstorm of the century. 17 deaths in Berks and Wilts alone. According to an article in the *Evening Advertiser* 20 people died in the snow within a 20-mile radius of Swindon. "George Cook, a farm labourer of Walcot Farm drove horse and cart into a drift by Swindon Parish Church. Dug out of snow to his chin, he set off to tell his master, and was found three days later in a ditch 200 yards short of Walcot farmhouse."²

1882/3 Unsettled weather prevailed.

1889 Wheat fell to 29/9d quarter.

During this period, Hodge's wages were hardly likely to rise, though he and his family did benefit from the very thing that was hitting the farmer, the cheap price of imported food. Indeed up to World War One, the average hourly rate of pay was only 3½d. for a 58 hour week, and that was not much more than the 3d. hour for which the National Agricultural Labourers' Union was agitating in 1872.

The upturn was slow. Between 1941 and 1948. I was doing casual farmwork for around 2/6d an hour; and by 1966 the basic agricultural wage was only 4/8½d an hour or £10.7.11½d. for a 44 hr. week.

Wages were lower in winter than in summer. "A labourer who has any prudence," Jefferies writes, "can in fact do very well by putting by a portion of his extra summer wages for the winter. He cannot expect the farmer (or any manufacturer) to pay the same price for a little work and short time, as for much work and long hours." This may be sound economics, but out of step with the Christian teaching, that regardless of the number of hours he has been called upon to work, the labourer is worthy of his hire. In any case, there was not much left over to put in the Bank, though £20 saved would be of the utmost value to an aged agricultural labourer.

In *Hodge* we are left in no doubt that Jefferies was not enamoured of what he termed Union agitators. The original Cottage Charter he thought reasonable as it had come directly from the labourers themselves. (Read pp. 262-3)

The new Charter however was brought to the cottage door from a distance, thought up by trouble-makers, and in Jefferies' view, smacking of communism. (Read pp. 263)

With a Tory readership, Jefferies for all his basic sympathies with the underdog, was not likely to favour these expectations. I think though that today he would applaud the agricultural labourer's record of patiently and persistently exercising the rights won for him by his Union since the days of Joseph Arch, without much recourse to the use of the strike weapon. Indeed it seems to have been Hodge's masters, the farmers, who have demonstrated their grievances far more than their employees.

The close working relationship between Hodge and his masters, the farmers, made striking a personal conflict, which few labourers relished. "But the kindly old habits are dying out," reports Jefferies, "before the hard and fast money system, and the abiding effects of Unionism. At one time it was common for a labourer to have the freedom of the farmhouse kitchen, and on Sundays, a free breakfast." Even up to the last war, regular and part-time workers, the farmer, and his wife sat down to meals together.

The first 19 chapters of the book, about two thirds of the text, mainly consists of brilliant pen-pictures of those elevated persons to whom Hodge touched his well-worn cap, and upon whom he relied for his livelihood, his patronage, his education, his punishment for wrong-doing, his assurance of a mug of soup and a hard bed at the end, and his final passport to heaven. The later chapters are more concerned with Hodge, his wife and children.

Prof. Keith, whose Introduction and Notes to this book are most detailed and valuable, does not agree with Henry Williamson's arbitrary re-arrangement of the chapters in his two editions of *Hodge...* Though I think Williamson was taking liberties, I am inclined to feel he had a point in mixing them up in a way that showed the inter-relationship of the characters, and their lives.

I don't intend in this talk to dwell on Squire Filbard; Harry Hodson, the farming genius; Cecil the ambitious young farmer; Philip the bicycle farmer, a product of the Agricultural College; or Mrs. ___ the fine lady farmer, whom Williamson in his 1957 edition, gives the name of Mrs. Thomson-Brown, though for no apparent reason. Nor shall I linger over the parson's wife, or the slightly ridiculous Country Curate; the Solicitor, or the hard-working newspaper editor, except so far as Hodge's life was affected by them.

Here they all are in this rich gallery of endearing portraits of real-life people, each of whom we remember, as Prof. Keith says, as we remember a character in fiction. Indeed *Hodge...* is full of delightful short stories, which a more natural writer of fiction might have filled out into half-a-dozen novels. Be that as it may, Jefferies can never be accused of not giving value for money.

As Andrew Rossabi points out in his Introduction to the Quartet Paperback, and John Pearson in *Landscape and Labour*, the twenty years when Jefferies was writing, was a most significant period in the history of rural life, and *Hodge...* is full of reminders of the great changes that were taking place. Though it cannot be regarded as an authentic textbook, and is therefore rarely quoted in modern works of reference, there are plenty of statistics available for those years, and since then, to substantiate his statements.

The very covers of the First Edition of 1880; illustrate these changes; Vol 1 bearing a gold-stamped design of a ploughman with horses, while the covers of Vol 2 show a steam-plough. Horses were still in common use on farms up to the end of WW2, the universal use of tractors being delayed by petrol-rationing and low output. But by 1965 there were only 19,000 horses on farms, compared to 413,000 tractors, with the driver enclosed on all sides from the weather. I hear now that horses are making a come-back, as the result of high fuel prices. Has the wheel gone full circle?

The steam plough, though cumbersome and dilatory, requiring the transport of coal and water over considerable distances to fuel the twin engines that hauled the ploughing tackle across the fields, revolutionised farming, just as the tractor and the combine-harvester were to do in the middle of our century. Labour-saving machinery - mowers, seed-drills, muck-spreaders, threshing-machines, the steam-plough-was viewed with alarm and hostility by the labourers whose skills with horses and hand processes, and their very livelihoods, were threatened.

From 1851, when 1½ million were employed on the land in the East and West, the rural exodus to the cities had reduced the number to just over a million. Two million acres of arable land were turned over to grass between 1881 and 1901, losing Hodge 60,000 to 80,000 jobs. Some of the workers found more remunerative and promising employment in the towns; others emigrated to Australia, Canada, New Zealand. No doubt many of the friendly New Zealanders whom we met on our recent holiday could trace their descent from those forced away from the green fields of England by the great depression.

For those who remained, life was hard. Education was coming into the countryside following the Act of 1870, requiring all children to attend school. Jefferies describes the new schools that were opening in the larger villages, which if they did not spell betterment for Hodge at least promised something better for his children. There were some disadvantages in the idea of compulsory education; for one thing 13 and 14-year-old girls were no longer available to look after the very young children while mother went out to do some work, thus stopping a valuable source of income. Unless special provisions were made, children had to truant if they were to engage in such seasonal operations as potato-picking. I have a copy of the Log Book of

Haydon Wick School, and there are many entries of such truancies. As late as 1948, I can recall that children were given leave of absence to do such work, the result of friendly relationships with local farmers.

Jefferies is unsympathetic towards the parents who grumbled at having to pay a few pence for their children's schooling, considering they'd been worse off if called upon to pay a heavy rate. It is interesting that precisely at the time that Jefferies was writing *Hodge...* a new school, with a school-house, was erected on land provided by the Earl of Egmont, facing R.J.'s house in Ewell Road, Surbiton, and no doubt to some extent spoiling his view of the fields. It is now closed.

One can reflect today on the wholesale closing down of small village schools, and wonder if it is for the betterment of village children. Also lest we think the farm worker is asking for too much money, we have to remember among other things, the increased cost of school meals, transport and school extras. Nevertheless there is today no country child who does not have the advantages of a Comprehensive education, a great improvement on having to enter a tough world straight from Standard 7 at the age of 14.

The labourer's children are the subject of objective study in Chapter XXII. There is something Dickensian in Jefferies' description of the 4-year-old toddler fending for himself around the farmyard, having been dressed by his mother on a cold morning, and sent out of doors, in hand-down clothes too big for him, with iron-bound boots and naked legs, cheeks plump and firm, round blue eyes bright, hair almost white like bleached straw. He has been making himself happy in the dirt, as a boy should if he is a boy. It is not the nasty unctuous filth of city courts and back lanes. Remembering what Jefferies says about bad sanitation and ventilation, and high infant mortality, Jefferies' acceptance of clean dirt, may sound a bit inconsistent and certainly does not chime with modern ideas about hygiene.

Perhaps the most appealing Chapter, in *Hodge...*, is No. XXI A Winter's Morning. It has all the clarity and vividness of an oil-painting. The fogger(fodderer) rising with the waning moon, and dressing without the expense of a candle, going out into the frost-covered world, and using the broad hay-knife, sharpened to a nice ty, to cut out a great cube of hay from the rick, and then filling the cribs. I have a fellow-feeling with the fogger. During the time that I worked on farms, I had to try to use the formidable hay-knife, with its cold, right-angled handle, and a very difficult job it is, especially when you are perched on a ladder, and your hands are frozen.

There are some equally realistic portraits of farm characters in this chapter. The milker with his three-legged stool; the carter taking out his loads of manure; the shepherd; the hedger, and the ditcher. Some of their work is straight-forward; some of it is hard and disagreeable. Nowadays the concentrates are dropped automatically into the feeding-troughs; the cows are milked by machinery; the hay is trussed in the fields; a tractor hauls the muck-spreader across the land; the ditch is gouged out by a mechanical digger, and the hedge is cut as straight as a ruler by an electric trimmer. Jefferies might conclude today that *Hodge* is spoon-fed and feather-bedded.

In the fashionable houses of mid to late Victorian England, fashionable young ladies and their Mamas were no doubt still sitting at their embroidery or improving the long dull hours with reading or games of patience. But for

the girls from the cottages and small holdings, life was real enough. Better education., the spread of knowledge and ideas through newspapers and magazines; easier transport, the expectation of better money and prospects - all these led Jefferies to the opinion that the girls were acquiring ideas above their station. (Read pp.235-6) The women had a slog of perhaps 5 miles each way to and from the nearest town for shopping, calling in at the local pub for refreshment before hurrying home to prepare meals for their menfolk. The car and the bus have now shortened the travelling time, eased the legs, but increased the expenses. Again it seems that things have turned full circle - the family car has cut out the local bus service, and the price of petrol is reducing the usefulness of the car. So to what extent had Hodge's wife benefitted?

As I have said, Jefferies gives good measure to his readers, and it is little surprise to me that people to whom I have introduced *Hodge...* in the new paperback edition, have found it fascinating. "You needn't apologise for Jefferies," someone said to me. "We are enjoying it, and my husband can hardly put the book down." Comparisons with life and conditions today come naturally - country eating and drinking habits; small-holdings and Land Settlement Schemes; the tied cottage; the use of country cottages as second homes for wealthy townees; country crafts; church-going are a few topics, that arouse discussion, and sometimes antagonism.

What have changed most in the last hundred years - the lives of the rural labourer, or those, of his masters? What are the essential differences between the milker on his three-legged stool, his forehead pressed against the warm flank of the cow, out on the field or in the shed, and the qualified man who operates a whole range of machines from the feeding-hopper, to the delivery into the milk-tanker? Today's farmer has to fill in his forms, make his intricate calculations, with a whole army of advisers, and run his mechanised holding with the help of one highly-trained man; the gentry of the big house, though finding it hard to keep the place going, are still held in high regard; Agricultural Colleges still turn out well-qualified young farmers; solicitors still earn a respectable income by knowing more about the law than their clients; the country markets, fairs, and auctions still bring them all together.

There have been changes in agricultural methods; no doubt the micro-chip will enable more farm processes to be done at the press of a button, thus putting Hodge at a further disadvantage; fewer people live and work in the countryside; old customs and habits are getting forgotten. These trends were apparent even when Jefferies was engaged in writing *Hodge...* The wonder is that with so much inconceivable advance in science and technology since his day, farms, fields, cottages, villages, have not already disappeared beneath some great concrete and glass structures created by Aldous Huxley or H.G. Wells.

If Hodge, weary after a hard day's work in the fields, and drowsy from too many gulps of strong cider, had gone to sleep beneath a hedge in 1880, and not woken up again until this present year...well, I must leave it to you to picture his impressions.

For all the surprises that would face him when he first made contact with a fellow human, or saw an aeroplane flying over his head, where he had

never before seen anything larger than a bird, perhaps his natural surroundings wouldn't seem very different from this description with which I finish this talk, It is from Chapter XX – 'Hodge's Fields,' which also reminds us that in none of his books did Jefferies fail to reveal his joy in the world of nature. (Read, pp. 213-214).

Notes

(1) AGRICULTURAL RECORDS A.D. 220 - 1977. J.M.Shatton (John Baker)

(2) TRAGIC TALE OF 1881 BLIZZARD *Evening Advertiser*, Swindon.

Also consulted. *Agricultural and Rural Society in Britain 1846 - 1914*

Trevor May (Pamphlet) Museum of English Rural Life. Reading.

Introduction and notes to *Hodge and his Masters* by Prof. W.J. Keith.

January 1979.

Page reference for readings are from the Quartet paperback Edition (1979) of *Hodge and his Masters*