BOOKS I HAVE READ: ENGLISH PASTORAL

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A beautiful and practical book that has won many awards and which deserves every one of them. You should read it.
Category: Observations

Whether we recognise it or not, our lives depend on fields. I don't care how urbane, sophisticated, technological or wealthy you are, your life depends on muck and what grows in it. If our financial system crashed, there would be suffering and probably death. If the internet goes down, it would be extremely inconvenient, to say the least. However, if fields and what we grow in them fail, then we die. All of us.

The problem is that our urbane, sophisticated, technological and wealthy society has allowed us to distance ourselves from the field that we depend on, and from those who farm and care for them. However, if you ever eat food, you should be interested in agriculture.

One way to gain an understanding of the issues in British agriculture is to read English Pastoral by James Rebanks (herdyshepherd1 on Twitter). It is a beautiful, thought provoking, informative and cautiously hopeful book about one farming family in the English Lake District. English Pastoral has gathered accolades and won awards galore and it deserves every one of them. If you have not read it yet, you should.

This is a book in three movements, tracing Rebanks' own life story through three generations of a farming family. The first (Nostalgia) concentrates on his grandfather's life and Rebanks' own childhood and describes the traditional farm of rose-tinted imagination.

The second section (Progress) considers his father and his own growing interest in running the farm. This is the most important part of the book. It tells the story of how the pressure to produce cheap food pushed farmers into making choices about how they farmed which had unintended consequences and which led to further decisions which changed the land even further. Incremental changes led to hedges being grubbed out, old rotational farming methods being replaced by mono-cultures dependant on an ever increasing application of chemicals. Even with a high degree of industrialisation, many farmers could not pay the bills.

The last movement (Utopia) describes Rebanks' own tenancy of a fell farm. Slowly and with the help from outsiders, he has started farming in a more nature-friendly way. Becks have been rewiggled to find their natural courses, rather than following the straight lines imposed upon them by earlier generations. Hedges and trees are planted (he plans to plant at least one tree, every day of his life) and livestock are grazed in a way which mimics the migratory grazing patterns wildlife. It sounds idyllic, but it doesn't pay the bills and he is quite open about this. The fact that Rebanks is a best-selling author and works as a UNESCO advisor helps keep their heads above water. In the end,

almost all farmers have to have some sideline or other.

This isn't a simple black and white story about industrial agriculture being bad and nature-friendly farming being good. The author is a farmer and he understands the pressures that farmers face that push them towards unsustainable practices. He is also quite blunt that unless we change our expectations of food costing next to nothing, then things are unlikely to change. (Incidentally, his remarks about Supermarkets reminded me of another excellent Cumbrian life-story, Grace Dent's wonderful book Hungry.) Equally, Rebanks is not romantic about some ecological schemes; the nonsense that some people spout about re-wilding gets short shrift (how can you rewild when native grazers such as bison and top predators such as wolves are absent?). Essentially, life is complex and no single solution will answer the problems that we face. However, we have to take our relationship to the planet that we live on more seriously.

I described the book as beautiful, and it is. There were a number of times when I fought back tears (not always successfully) as I listened to it. The passage where he describes he and his daughter watching a barn-owl hunt is lovely, but his subsequent musings on how his daughter will reflect on that event when she is an old woman is absolutely wonderful. (The fact that most of us have never seen a barn owl hunt is a sign of the poverty of our world.)

So, why am I reviewing this book on a blog which concentrates on Christian mission? There are a few reasons. The passages where a young ecologist comes to talk to Rebanks and his father about changing the way that water flows through the farm is an excellent example of how outsiders can help inspire change in a conservative, traditional environment. A lot of Christian NGOs could learn lessons. Ultimately, though the author would not see it this way, it is a book about the creation mandate; our call to look after the world delegated to us by the creator. In a fallen world, there are no easy solutions, we have to feed a growing population, but we have a responsibility to care for the planet at the same time. We only live here for a short time and we have to pass it on to the next generation. My final thought in Christian terms is that we should care that curlews, yellow-hammers and thousands of species of insects and plants are vanishing from our world. I know lots of Christians who get very aerated talking about the creation of species, but who seem completely indifferent to their extinction. This makes no sense. That insect which has vanished because we have destroyed its habitat may seem unimportant; but one bright morning at the dawn of the world, God looked at it and said that it was good. That should be enough to make Christians care!

> *Tell them what is happening on the land, someone has to tell them. When I was young, there were cowslips and ragged robin everywhere and butterflies on the thyme on the rocky crags*

> *on the fell. The becks were full of minnows, the pools alive with them and water boatmen skating on the top. I may be old and stupid, but I like to see them things, but you don't see them anymore. And greed is to blame - greed. And it will get worse if they don't change things. Tell them.*
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> *Nathan Wear, Dowthwaite Head Farm quoted in the epigraph.*

Similar sentiments were expressed by fell runner (and international cyclist) Billy Bland in a book which I reviewed on my running blog.