BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE SHEPHERD'S LIFE

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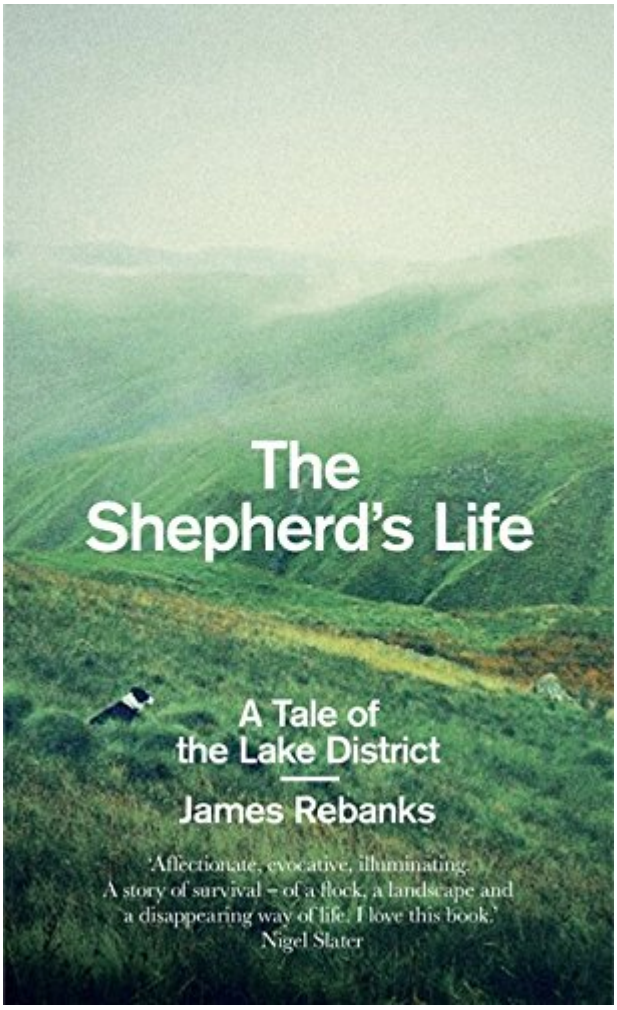
"If we want to understand the people in the foothills of Afghanistan, we may need to try and understand the people in the foothills of England." This may well be the best book I will read this year and you should read it, too.
Category: Reviews

My dad was a pitman. Some people might have called him a coal miner, but to those who shared our family's world, he was a pitman. He was proud of his work and the hundreds of years of tradition which lay behind it.Â The history and folklore of mining was part of his life and the life of his brothers in a very natural way. They spoke in their own dialect and would speak about events in their own little town as if they had only happened yesterday - though they may well have occurred before they were born.

ReadingÂ The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake DistrictÂ by James Rebanks (@herdyshepherd1) took me back to that world. This wonderful book is set an afternoon's bus journey from where I grew up, but in some ways it could have been much closer. When Reebanks writes about his family and the way that tradition had endured down through the generations, there were distinct echoes of the conversations around my grandma's table on Sunday afternoons. Even some of the vocabulary was similar: 'bait' for packed lunch is the most obvious example. The lowland fields nearest the farm house are 'in-bye', but the coal seam far from the mineshaft is 'out-bye'. This can no doubt be traced back to some Norse etymology.

But there is one significant difference between the farming tradition of Cumbria and the mining tradition of Co. Durham. James Rebanks saw no point in studying at school, he knew he was going work on the farm and that was all he wanted, whereas it was drummed into me from an early age that study was the way to avoid the pit. For all his pride in his tradition and background, my dad wanted me to escape. Mining in the North-East had a proud tradition of a few hundred years, farming in Cumbria dates back thousands.

I've loved the Lake District, where Rebanks farms, with a passion, since I first made that afternoon bus trip when I was 12. When we lived in Africa, we kept Wainwright's guides to the fells in our loo, and I would spend long hours dreaming of walking the hills and the ridges. If I have a regret in life, it's that I've lived most of it a long way from that top, left corner of England.



However, I had to acknowledge that my view of the Lake District is different to that of the people who live and farm there. For me it's a playground, somewhere to relax, for the famers it is much, much more. At one point, Reebanks describes looking at one of Wainwrights beautifully detailed descriptions of a walk near his home and realising that little that he valued was even mentioned. It is as if the farming community are invisible to the tourist and fell-walker.

I fear that he is correct and because of this, everyone who tramps those hills, climbs those crags or takes a trip-bus around the lakes should read this book. They need to discover something of the world that they are travelling through, but not noticing. Having written anthropological papers about a people far from home, I was struck by this quote.

> *If we want to understand the people in the foothills of Afghanistan, we may need to try and understand the people in the foothills of England*

This book tells the story of one shepherd, but you are always aware that he is part of something

much bigger than himself that stretches back a thousand or more years. People come and go, but farming continues.

> *Individuals live and die, but the farms, the flocks and the old families go on.*
>
> *Our lives were entwined around something we all cared about more than anything else in the world. The farm.*

The Lake District was shaped firstly by the ice that carved the U-shaped valleys and ribbon lakes, then by men who cleared the land and gave the valleys and hills their names, but it is maintained by sheep. The herdwicks that graze the fell sides and keep the bracken down and stop the hills returning to woodland. If you love the Lakes, you owe a lot to the families and the flocks. Those who talk about 're-wilding' and reintroducing predator species to the Lakes should ponder a bit the how the landscape came to be what it is.

As you read the book, you can't help picking up something of the author's pride in his flock and his dogs.

> *First rule of shepherding: itâ€™s not about you, itâ€™s about the sheep and the land. Second rule: sometimes you canâ€™t win. Third rule: shut up, and go and do the work.*

Shepherds don't easily get days off, and the flock need tending to even on the most 'sacred' of holidays in mid winter.

> *Tending to a flock of sheep or feeding cattle feels like the most natural thing to do on the birthday of someone born in a manger in a faraway land of shepherds.*

In many ways, hill farming is miles away from the industrial cereal farm of much of the rest of England.

> *Our farming system is not about maximizing productivity, but producing what we can sustainably from the landscape.*

But sadly, hill farming is not a profitable business. Almost all hill-farmers have had to diversify and find alternative sources of income - farming tourists alongside the sheep.

> *When I asked her which was better, farming or selling souvenirs, she told me there was more money in souvenirs, but sheâ€™d rather keep ducks and pigs, because that is what made her family and these villages what they are.*

It is a scandal that it costs hill farmers more to shear their sheep than they can earn from selling the fleeces. But the sheep have to be sheared if they are to stay healthy. Likewise, dairy farmers receive less than cost for the milk their herds produce. This is simply wrong and in the long term, it will come back to bite us.

Look,Â The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake DistrictÂ is a book that you should read. Not because it is a very well written, nor because it gives you a wonderful insight into the life of hill shepherds and the traditions of the fells. It does all of this and more. However, you should read it because it is important. Everything we eat, without exception, comes from the land and the sea and from the hard work of men like James Rebanks. We don't actuallyÂ *need* a lot of the 'essentials' of modern life, but we cannot do without the food that farmers produce.

Centuries of coal-mining tradition came to a close, not because their was no more coal under the North-Sea, but because of cheap imports from elsewhere. The effects on the Co. Durham mining communities are well documented. We cannot afford for the same thing to happen to farming and agriculture in the UK, it is far too important to us. City and town-dwellers who wouldn't recognise a Herdwick, or who can't tell wheat from barley need to start to take an interest in where our food comes from and who are the people who produce it.Â The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake DistrictÂ is a great place to start.

Normally my book of the year is something in the theological or missiological vein; the next nine months will need to turn up something special if this year's best isn't to be the life story of a Herdwick Shepherd.