

# The Rural Tradition



My father-in-law, an Ulsterman, was an enthusiast collector of books by AG Street. His collection of Street's books now sits on my book shelves, and adds a bit of variety to the bible commentaries. AG Street was a Wiltshire born farmer who lived through the years of the depression in the 1930s, and found that he was able to supplement his meagre income by turning his hand to writing, and later broadcasting. He was successful in both areas, and especially so when he broadcast on radio during the years of the Second World War. A member of the Home Guard, he also knew what it was to eke a living from the soil; he was practical, sturdy, unsentimental, and caring. A lot of people listened to his broadcasts, or read his weekly column in *Farmers Weekly*, which he continued to write for thirty years.

During the war years he contributed to a small book called *Countryside Character*, published in 1946. Other writers who contributed were the novelist Daphne du Maurier, Henry Williamson (of *Tarka the Otter* fame), the ruralist HJ Massingham and Adrian Bell, the father of the former MP, Martin. It's an extraordinary little book, published with black and white photos of children, families looking forward to peacetime, Land Girls working on war-time farms, craftsmen, and shepherds tending their sheep. There are also photos of Britain's landscape, together with churches, minsters, and coastal scenes from Britain's shoreline. Here was a country emerging from a long war, with a broken economy, devastated towns and cities, food rationing still in place, and yet it is a country full of hope and expectation for the future. There's a conviction in the book that the nation will rebuild itself, and part of that mood comes from a deep appreciation of Britain's natural beauty as well as a desire to build a better world after the horrors of the war years. The church was bound up in that vision, as a stake holder in national life and as a physical presence in the countryside.

We can't recreate an earlier period in our national life, and it wouldn't be appropriate to try, but I find the book encouraging in its sense of hope and expectancy for the future. Today Britain is unsure of its place in the world, and part of our future will be to re-discover our national identity, as well as our hopes for the world in which our children and grandchildren are growing up. We have a duty of care to ourselves, our families, and the communities in which we live, and part of our rural vocation is to re-connect with the wells of hope and inspiration which are found in our Christian heritage. From Gilbert White onwards, there's a long line of mature writing and thinking associated with the countryside. Allowing that tradition to be heard in our missional contexts, as we call them today, might well reconnect us to those who have gone before, and found guidance for their journey in faith.

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