

THE RURAL TRADITION IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL, 1900-1939

*By the same author*

John Cowper Powys: Novelist

The Ancient People (poems)

Paradise Stairway (poems)

THE RURAL TRADITION  
IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL  
1900—1939

Glen Cavaliero

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**For John Skidmore**

The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment. As mankind is always struggling in the toils of old relationships, art is always ahead of the 'times', which themselves are always far in the rear of the living moment.

D. H. Lawrence,  
'Morality and the Novel'

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# Preface

The writers whose novels about country life succeeded those of Hardy have, with the exception of T. F. Powys, been neglected by academic criticism. That neglect, however understandable in view of the predominating urban character of our civilisation and culture (and thus of our assumptions and preoccupations) does disservice to a body of work which has been as widely read in its own day by an intelligent reading public as those books now held to be most representative of their time. The reason for this is not so much the contrast between 'rural' and 'urban' novelists, but rather a matter of limitation. Those novelists who are generally accepted as being of major significance extend their area of concern both geographically and psychologically beyond that of the writers considered here: in this respect the rural novelists have been neglected because their achievement seems, in a derogatory sense, provincial. But it is none the less an achievement – one that, in addition to its intrinsic merits, sheds a valuable light on the condition of life and literature in the four decades preceding the outbreak of the Second World War. The writers discussed below all possess a certain individuality, are gifted in various degrees, and are representative of their time: they are thus even more valuable to historians than are greater artists, who are usually ahead of it. In the history of literature, best-selling novelists like Hugh Walpole, Francis Brett Young and Mary Webb may not be of great importance; but in the history of reading they are. They reflect the taste and outlook of their time so well precisely because they lacked the major writer's capacity to transcend it.

The rural fiction of this period shows a traceable development. The essentially literary and artificial concept of an isolated 'peasantry', found, in the early years of the century, in the work of Eden Phillpotts, changed to a more integrated picture of a whole rural society in the novels of Sheila Kaye-Smith and Constance Holme, writers whose best work appeared in the second decade. The 1920s were years of rural

fantasy and romance, of the sudden posthumous success of Mary Webb and of the discovery of T. F. Powys. With the 1930s the revived literary concern with social realities was reflected in the popularity of a number of farmer novelists and of the early fiction of H. E. Bates. There was a general movement away from imaginative abstraction towards documentation, as can be seen in the virtual demise of any significant rural fiction after the end of the Second World War. What work has been produced has continued earlier traditions, and of the writers discussed here only Henry Williamson and H. E. Bates have added substantially to their achievement.

My emphasis in the present study, however, does not lie on chronology but on the novelists' approach to their material, and on an examination of what they single out for treatment in the rural theme. I am concerned with methodology, with the way in which their work reflects the fluctuations of creativity in a context which was particularly unfavourable to its intelligent expression. After a preliminary discussion of popular romantic attitudes towards the country, attention is focused on a number of writers who wrote of it in the naturalistic mode, proceeding later to the more subjective novelists for whom the record of country life is a medium for personal and philosophical explorations. The study begins and closes with two novelists, E. C. Booth and H. E. Bates, who serve to illustrate with especial clarity the literary issues confronting the rural novelist at the beginning of the period, and their solution at the end of it. I have hoped to demonstrate what the factors were that went to the making of successful art in rural fiction; for although the creative impulse remains mysterious, some study of the ground in which it flourishes is both possible and useful. It is with this in mind that greater attention has been paid to some novelists than to others.

Two writers who are obviously relevant to the matter in hand have been omitted from any detailed consideration. D. H. Lawrence has already been discussed extensively by other critics, and I have been content here to use his achievement as a touchstone. The other writer is John Cowper Powys, about whom I have already written at length elsewhere. Rooted though his work is in the rural tradition, it goes so far beyond it that I have limited myself to a substantial footnote indicating his significance.

In allotting space to the various writers I have been governed by a sense of their literary worth, and by a desire in the case of several of them to draw attention to interesting, enjoyable and rewarding novelists belonging to a neglected literary tradition. My interest in all

of them has been two fold: a historical interest, in which they are studied as representative of trends and tastes of their time; and a literary interest, in which the presiding factor is the novelist's handling of his material. The interrelation of these two approaches seemed necessary in view of the peculiar position of the rural school in twentieth-century English fiction. It may also prove rewarding in its own right.

My thanks are due to Mr Nigel Hancock and the staff of the Cambridge University Library Reading Room; to Mr Donald Hopewell and the Oxford University Press for access to letters and manuscripts by Constance Holme; to Mr and Mrs Basil Saunders for allowing me to inspect certain of the manuscripts of E. H. Young; and to Mr Kenneth Hopkins for his help with the proofs. For valuable criticism I am especially grateful to Mrs Gillian Beer and Professor Raymond Williams; and also to Mrs Irene Cavanaugh, Dr Paris Leary and Mr John Toft for discussing so helpfully with me the novelists described below. Finally I would like to thank the Master and Fellows of St Catharine's College, Cambridge, whose kindness made it possible for me to write this book.

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