

War Memorials

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In the mid 1920s H. V. Morton began a series of articles in the *Daily Express* in which he wrote about his travels through the British countryside. The book that resulted, *In Search of England* (1927), quickly became one of the mid-twentieth century's best sellers, going through twenty-three editions in its first ten years and selling a third of a million copies by 1964. By this time Morton had sold almost three million copies of his books, marking him out as 'the most popular travel writer in Britain' in the period.¹

In Search of England arguably owed its popular success to Morton's reassuring account of the continuing existence of a timeless rural England, a place of gentle natural beauty and understated folk wisdom that offered both a refuge from the onrush of modernity and a safe, sane place from which its excesses might be viewed and placed in perspective. It operates, in other words, in a tradition of consolatory countryside literature that has its roots in Romanticism and its more recent flowering in the writing of George Borrow and Richard Jefferies. What sets it slightly apart from this tradition, however, and makes it more than merely a series of impressions of the English countryside, is hinted at in its title – its sense of quest. Just as T. S. Eliot had employed the pattern of a quest to give shape to his journey into modern despair in *The Waste Land* (1922), Morton uses the

¹ C. P. Perry, 'In Search of H. V. Morton: Travel Writing and Cultural Values in the First Age of British Democracy', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10. 4 (1999), 431-56 (p. 433).

idea to give both a rationale and a narrative structure to his more consoling journey into Englishness.

The book begins, not in England but in Jerusalem during the First World War: it is here, while serving as a soldier, that Morton has the vision of England that will compel his post-war journey. The England he envisions is a familiar, reassuring one of thatched cottages, sleepy villages and quaint bridges, described in an ecstatic manner reminiscent of the exilic idylls of Robert Browning's 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' and Rupert Brooke's 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester'. It is implicitly the landscape of a 'home' for whose values he has served, and for which he suffers the inconvenience of temporary exile.² In imagining it he has, significantly, 'the only religious moment I experienced in Jerusalem'.³

At the far end of this narrative arc is another sacred site, a church containing the tomb of a Norman knight in Warwickshire, the geographical and symbolic heart of England. The honeyed style is typical Morton:

The little church was full of corn sheaves. Apples, picked for their size and colour, washed and polished, stood in a line against the altar rails. Above the empty pew of the absent squire, barley nodded its gold beard. The church smelt of ripe corn and fruit. Some one, I wonder if consciously, or just by chance, had

² For the significance of such ideas of the countryside as 'home' for the exiled imperialist, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), pp. 281-2.

³ H. V. Morton, *In Search of England* (London: Methuen, 1927), p. 3.

placed a posy of flowers in the stiff, stone hands of Sir Gervais. He lay there with his thin, mailed toes to the vaulting, his sword at his side and in his hands this offering from his own land to warm his heart in a Norman heaven. . . . The church emptied. The noon sun fell in bright spears of colour over the old Jocelyns; beyond the porch was a picture of harvest set in a Norman frame. The rich earth had borne its children, and over the fields was that same smile which a man sees only on the face of a woman when she looks down to the child at her breast.

I went out into the churchyard where the green stones nodded together, and I took up a handful of earth and felt it crumble and run through my fingers, thinking that as long as one English field lies against another there is something left in the world for a man to love.

‘Well,’ smiled the vicar, as he walked towards me between the yew trees, ‘that, I am afraid, is all we have to show here.’

‘You have England,’ I said.⁴

The reasons why Morton might want to end his search for the essence of England at a rural tomb are worth considering. Perhaps he is simply returning us to a common trope of Englishness, typified in Thomas Gray and the Graveyard school of 18th Century English poetry, that reminds us we are only temporary custodians of a landscape held in trust for future generations: returning us to the social contract that Edmund Burke defined as the

⁴ *In Search of England*, pp. 279-80.

‘partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’.⁵

But it is arguable that Morton has more recent deaths on his mind, also. This is partly suggested by his earlier references in other works to the dead of the recent war. His description of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior from his *The Spell of London* of the previous year, for example, employs a similar stock of images and emphases and places a dead body at England’s symbolic heart:

Westminster Abbey I stood there recently beside our Unknown Warrior, who lies not only at the heart of London, but also at the heart of England, here in magic earth, in this sacred soil, so warm in love, so safe in honour. No noise of traffic disturbs his sleep, no unkind wind whistles over him – no solitude of night. Instead, the silence of a mighty church, a silence as deep and lovely as though he were lying in some green country graveyard steeped in peace, above him a twilight in which the stored centuries seem to whisper happily of good things done for England.⁶

What reminds one most particularly of the recent war in the final scene of *In Search of England*, however, is Morton’s artful use of a series of motifs characteristic of Rupert Brooke. When Morton describes a ‘rich earth’ which has ‘borne its children’, there is a

⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 194-5.

⁶ H. V. Morton, *The Spell of London* (London; Methuen, 1926), p. 15.

clear echo of the nurturing, maternal countryside of Brooke's best-known war sonnet 'The Soldier', with its similarly 'rich earth' concealing the 'dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware'. Similarly, when Morton reaches for the words to describe the peace attained by the knight he adapts Brooke's distinctive and celebrated formulation of 'hearts at peace, under an English heaven' to describe his own soldier warming 'his heart in a Norman heaven'.

The reasons why Morton might use Brooke in this way – and his work offers many other reminders of Brooke's wartime poetry – are perhaps not hard to find.⁷ Brooke's celebrated example, advertised in wartime by the likes of Winston Churchill, Dean Inge, and Edward Marsh, meant that his work had become, as one commentator has put it, 'a kind of repository of English holiness'.⁸ This was the result not only of his wartime sonnets, but also prose pieces like 'An Unusual Young Man' (1914) in which his autobiographical narrator has a vision similar to the one which Morton later experienced in Jerusalem: the 'full flood of "England"' sweeping over him in an impression that 'if

⁷ For example, in a later book Morton would write about what he describes as 'the Soul of Scotland', the Scottish National War Memorial at Edinburgh Castle, imagining 'the presence of those 100,000 lads who lie in soil which is for ever Scotland', thereby neatly tying up Brooke with Scotland's greatest war book, Ian Hay's *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915). In *Search of Scotland* (London: Methuen, 1929), pp. 54 and 52.

⁸ Geoffrey Matthews, quoted by Jon Silkin in *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 67.

he'd ever been sentimental enough to use the word, he'd have called "holiness".⁹

Brooke's death, in apparent fulfilment of the pledges of his 'Soldier' sonnet, sealed the warrant of this reverent attitude: crystallising the idea of a nation re-consecrated through the act of sacrifice and figuring him as a kind of noble crusader buried deep in the nation's mindscape.

When Morton talks of loving the countryside and ensuring its preservation as 'sacred duties', and implies that these values are guaranteed by the memory of the dead embedded in that landscape, he is, then, drawing on Brooke.¹⁰ But he is also drawing on a much wider cultural reconfiguration of the countryside in the First World War. Two elements of this in particular are worth consideration. The first, sponsored by extensive propaganda in both literature and popular culture, was that the war was being fought not so much for the British political state as for a national spirit embodied in the British countryside. This was a rhetorical strategy, but it seems often to have been deeply-felt at a personal level. Denis Winter, for example, quotes one soldier describing what he is fighting for as simply 'English fields, lanes, trees, good days in England, all that is synonymous with liberty'.¹¹ Edward Thomas was equally clear in his own mind that his service was made for the sake of the land. When he was asked why he had enlisted, his

⁹ Rupert Brooke, 'An Unusual Young Man', *New Statesman*, 29 August 1914; reprinted in Christopher Hassall (ed.), *The Prose of Rupert Brooke* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1956), 195-200 (p. 199).

¹⁰ H. V. Morton, *In Search of England*, p. viii.

¹¹ Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Allen Lane, 1978), p. 32.

gesture was the same as Morton's at the close of *In Search of England*. He stooped down, picked up a handful of the English earth and crumbled it between his fingers. 'Literally, for this,' he is said to have answered.¹² It is worth remembering here that in the First World War the English countryside was never – as it was in the Napoleonic Wars before, or the Second World War after – seriously threatened with invasion. Such justifications, then, could have little real basis. What they attested to instead was a powerful symbolic reading of the English countryside that had attained a new force with war.

The second circumstance that facilitated Morton's associations of sacredness and death in the landscape, was the revival during the war of pastoral elegy. Pastoral elegy represents landscape as a form of memorial. It is a way of remembering the dead through their links with a known, shared countryside, and was, as Paul Fussell has shown, an important means for soldier-poets to commemorate their dead comrades.¹³ But it was also important – perhaps more important – for non-combatants. Crucial to this was the decision of the Imperial War Graves Commission to forbid repatriation of the bodies of the war dead. Bereaved relatives, wives, and friends had no body over which they might grieve and no accessible burial plot on which their mourning might be focused. As a

¹² Eleanor Farjeon, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 154.

¹³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 231-69.

consequence much poetry of remembrance, especially by women, sought a generalised consolation in the landscape through which the dead had ranged in life.¹⁴

Vera Brittain's initial response to the deaths of her brother and fiancé, as it is recounted in *Testament of Youth* (1933), is both very moving and quite typical in this regard. Brittain's immediate impulse in her grief was to walk the countryside above Oxford, and, eventually, to write the pastoral elegy, 'Boar's Hill, October 1919', a poem which resonates with the brooding presence of the dead 'who always delighted to roam / Over the Hill where so often together we trod'.¹⁵ Beatrix Brice made such associations the basis of a poem, 'To the Vanguard', printed in *The Times* and popularised as a Christmas card in 1916. Here the landscape itself was seen as continuous and sufficient reminder of the army's efforts: 'Oh, little mighty Force, your way is ours, / This land inviolate your monument'.¹⁶

British war poetry did not always promote such ideas. Some significant poems interrogated the assumptions of a consolatory nature poetry – among them the work of Charles Hamilton Sorley, Edward Thomas, and Wilfred Owen – but Brooke's poetry, and

¹⁴ For examples, see Catherine W. Reilly (ed.), *Scars Upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago, 1981).

¹⁵ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900- 1925* (1933) (London: Virago, 1978), pp. 484-6.

¹⁶ In Dominic Hibberd and John Onions, *Poetry of the Great War: An anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

pastoral elegy more widely, helped legitimate a discourse in which, as Cairns Craig has put it, 'England was recreated between 1914 and 1918 as the site of a rural holiness'.¹⁷

This was manifested literally in the rural idioms of memorialisation: in the self-consciously English vernacular styling of British cemeteries on the Western Front as well as the many rural and garden memorials across the native landscape. 'The English countryside became', as one commentator has put it, 'a memorial to the dead' as many parks and open spaces were acquired in remembrance.¹⁸ Walkers arriving on the top of Great Gable in the Lake District were now met at the summit by a memorial plaque informing them that the whole mountain had been bought and dedicated to the memory of members of The Fell and Rock Climbing Club killed in the war. Such memorialisation was actively encouraged by the National Trust, which suggested that:

no more fitting form of memorial could be found to commemorate those who had fallen in the war than to dedicate to their memory some open space, some hilltop commanding beautiful views, some waterfall or sea-cliff, which could be enjoyed for all time by those who survived.¹⁹

¹⁷ Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), p. 131.

¹⁸ Carolyn Dakers, *The Countryside at War 1914-1918* (London: Constable, 1987), p. 17.

¹⁹ Quoted by Robin Fedden in *The Continuing Purpose: A History of the National Trust* (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 18.

In this way, the Trust acquired much of the Lake District landscape around Great Gable, including Scafell Pike, Great End, and a large part of Scafell.

These notions of a memorial landscape were never very far from consciousness in written accounts of the countryside after the war. One such is A. G. Macdonell's, *England Their England* (1933), a broadly comic, Wodehousian novel often celebrated for its humorous account of a rural cricket match. But it is also a book with a serious core. Like *In Search of England*, it begins in wartime – at Passchendaele where its Scots hero Donald Cameron pledges himself to discovering the secrets of Englishness – and ends in a post-war historical countryside ripe with *memento mori*. Cameron's search for the essential England concludes, after many comic adventures, in the landscape above Winchester Cathedral. Having wandered 'among the memorials to long-dead English soldiers' in the Cathedral, he finds himself sitting by the ancient remains of 'a circular trench which the Britons had dug as a defence against the Legions'. Here, 'presided over by the creator, the inheritor, the ancestor, and the descendant of it all, the green and kindly land of England', he realises that the nation's essential character has now, finally been revealed to him.²⁰ He dozes and a vision appears – strongly reminiscent of Edward Thomas's wartime poem 'Roads' – of a dream road running from the north to the channel coast along which are walking the English dead, the citizen soldiers, ancient and modern, who have laid down their lives for the land. Cameron discovers, like Morton before him, the end of his quest for the national character in a landscape inspirited and valorised by the dead.

²⁰ A. G. Macdonell, *England Their England* (1933; London: World Books, 1941), pp. 297-8.

Several other post-war novels employ a similar emphasis in spiritualising the landscape and figuring their protagonists as supplicants seeking the blessings of the dead who inhabit it. In Wilfrid Ewart's *Way of Revelation* (1921) a former soldier, Adrian Knoyle, is rescued from bohemian enervation when he pledges himself to a life of rustic domesticity with the aptly named Faith, the fiancée of his best friend who has been killed in the war. The book concludes – like Macdonell's – in a landscape bearing subtle remembrances of war. The pair sit, facing 'the low opposite ramparts of the plain', against which 'a line of poplars rose like a rank of soldiers', on the earthwork of an ancient Citadel. This is the countryside that will become their home, not only on account of its great natural beauty but also because of its pressing reminders of the war dead:

'This place is wonderfully solemn and beautiful,' she said. 'I shall often come up here and look down at our home and listen to the wind sighing through those old fir-trees. Whenever I hear that I think of the voices of people one has known and who have gone from us.'

His response was to take her hand.

'I feel they are very near to us now, Adrian. . . .'²¹

The popular nerve touched by his book was squeezed again by Francis Brett Young in another popular work, *A Portrait of Clare* (1927), which similarly rises to an ecstatic

²¹ Wilfrid Ewart, *Way of Revelation: A Novel of Five Years* (1921: Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1986), pp. 532-3.

rural conclusion that conflates natural with national values in an elevated quasi-religious prose:

This is my religion, Clare, and I thank God for it. Humbly, I assure you, in spite of all the pride I have in it. The earth that bore me and all my forebears. Its own beauty; the courage, the patience, the goodwill, the piety of the men who have lived in it. When I think of England that is what I mean. . . . That shadow – yes, only a ripple, North of Cotswold – is Edgehill: Shakespeare was born beneath it. And even today. . . there's Elgar, Housman, Masefield. Small names but greatly English, whatever else they may be. . . .²²

Works of a more literary nature might avoid such rather Brooke-like excesses of nature-spiritualism, but a range of novels as different as Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy and Neil M. Gunn's *Highland River* (1937), have a similar underpinning in their representations of former soldiers returning from the war to a consoling countryside in which they might properly remember the dead.

The natural extension of these ideas of a sacred national landscape is that one can no longer travel innocently through this countryside. The accumulated weight of the historical dead who have consecrated this landscape, augmented substantially by the recent war, mean that to travel through it is to enact a pilgrimage. This is what John Buchan's Richard Hannay discovers in *Mr Standfast* (1919). The Scots-South African

²² Francis Brett Young, *Portrait of Clare* (1927), quoted in Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel 1900-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 89.

Hannay undergoes a similar experience to Brooke's 'Unusual Young Man' and the heroes of MacDonell's and Ewart's novels, discovering in the historical English landscape the war's spiritual significance:

In that moment I had a kind of revelation. I had a vision of what I had been fighting for, what we were all fighting for. It was peace, deep and holy and ancient I understood what a precious thing this little England was, how old and kindly and comforting, how wholly worth striving for. The freedom of an acre of her soil was cheaply bought by the blood of the best of us.²³

What drives this idea home, is that Buchan plainly models his novel on *The Pilgrim's Progress*: a common source, as George Parfitt has suggested, for literary narratives of the First World War.²⁴ *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the key to the cyphers used by Hannay within the novel's action, but also furnishes a pattern for the novel's narrative. The journey Hannay takes towards both foiling the Germans and finding a home in the post-war Cotswold countryside is the same as Christian's journey to the Celestial City. His immediate end is a place in the English countryside, figured as a Land of Beulah, in which he can meditate on the wartime sacrifice of his comrade Peter Pienaar – the Mr Standfast of the book's title.

The 1920s and 30s saw a proliferation of writing of all kinds about the British countryside. Some of this was, as David Matless has shown, radical and

²³ John Buchan, *Mr Standfast* (1919) (London: Nelson, 1923), pp. 23-4.

²⁴ George Parfitt, *Fiction of the First World War* (London: Faber, 1988), pp. 12-25.

progressive in its attempts to create a modern, planned rural economy.²⁵ Some of it was broadly Socialist, working in the tradition of William Morris and Robert Blatchford to reclaim the rural for social collectivity and ensure free access to the countryside. But most of it, especially in its more popular manifestations, was conservative and nostalgic, and seemed to be motivated less by reviving the fortunes of country dwellers than preserving a picturesque, traditional countryside against the encroachments of the urban and suburban masses. Key thinkers in political Conservatism developed a nostalgic idea of what Patrick Wright has called ‘Deep England’ to counter the realities of strike and slump; many, among them prime minister Stanley Baldwin, employing, as Frans Coetzee has put it, ‘recycled paeans to rustic simplicity’ to establish theirs as the party of country and patriotism.²⁶

In his 1909 survey of the national scene, *The Condition of England*, C. F. G. Masterman argued sensibly on demographic evidence that ‘no one to-day would seek in the ruined villages and dwindling populations of the countryside the spirit of an “England” four-fifths of whose people have now crowded into the cities’.²⁷ That this was

²⁵ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998), pp. 25-100.

²⁶ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 81-7. Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 162.

²⁷ C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909), p. 12.

According to the 1911 Census, less than 22% of the British population now lived in rural areas.

exactly what popular writing was doing little more than a decade later suggests that there had been some fundamental alteration in the way the countryside was viewed. This was apparent in the post-war travelogue and country novel. It could be seen too in the establishment of new literary journals like the *London Mercury*, which in 1919 dedicated itself to encouraging a ‘poetry of the English landscape and especially the English landscape as a historical thing’.²⁸ Patrick Abercrombie, similarly sought both a national and historical justification for his preservationism, when in establishing the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England, he suggested that ‘the greatest historical monument that we possess, the most essential thing which *is* England, is the countryside.’²⁹ The rediscovery of the painting of John Constable had a similar emphasis. Previously neglected, his moody skies and overwhelming landscapes, were now seen as the archetypal representations of Englishness.³⁰ In music, too, Ralph Vaughan Williams helped ensure with his war works *The Lark Ascending* (1914-20) and *Pastoral Symphony*

²⁸ ‘Editorial Notes’, *London Mercury*, I. 1 (November 1919) p. 2; I. 3 (January 1920), p. 260.

²⁹ In *The Preservation of Rural England* (1926), quoted by Philip Lowe, ‘The Rural Idyll Defended: From Preservation to Conservation’, in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The Rural Idyll* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 121.

³⁰ See Herbert Cornish, *The Constable Country* (London: Heath Cranton, 1932) and Peter Bishop, *An Archetypal Constable: National Identity and the Geography of Nostalgia* (London: Athlone, 1995), pp. 115-77.

(1916-21) that the rural vernacular was placed at the centre of an English music consciously seeking to create ‘national monuments’.³¹

This notion of historical continuity was evidently a way of resisting the realities of industrial slump in the cities and the seemingly irresistible spread of the clutter of ribbon developments, by-passes, pylons, tea-rooms, and all the other signs of commercial modernity that threatened to swamp the countryside. But what arguably gave that solemn historical sense its validity was the memory of war in that landscape, a memory jogged explicitly by the literature of the First World War and implicitly by the travel writing and rural novels afterwards: the journeys into the English spirit of H. V. Morton, the serio-sentimental comedy of A. G. Macdonell, and the reverent travel guides such as Batsford’s ‘Pilgrim’s Library’ series, in which the English countryside was trodden on as though it were consecrated ground.

The speaker of Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘Aftermath’ had exhorted the reader to ‘look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you’ll never forget.’ It would appear that for the many former soldiers and others who travelled in the English countryside after the war, such an injunction was superfluous: the dead could never be forgotten and the landscape was their constant reminder.

³¹ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music* (Oxford, 1934), p. 10, quoted by George Revill in ‘The Lark Ascending: Monument to a Radical Pastoral’, *Landscape Research*, 16. 2 (Summer 1991), pp. 25-30.

