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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ronald Blythe: 'Just a voice for his time'

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Abstract
Ronald Blythe is often seen as Britain's finest living rural writer. He has published over thirty books, some of them, like *Akenfield* and *The View in Winter*, widely acknowledged as classics, inspiring a film and follow-up books by others. His literary output has been extraordinary: novels, short stories, poetry, rural documentary writing, oral history, 'parish' writing, religious books, his own autobiographical work (among a remarkable milieu of creative people), and historical studies ranging from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. He has also edited a great range of authors and types of writing. Ronald Blythe is especially an East Anglian author, writing about that English region, in whose work the local and the religious are often to the fore. As this famous author approaches one hundred years of age, this article is a forthright academic appreciation of his work, a discussion of its themes and impressive variety, and an analysis of the meanings and importance of his writing to modern readerships.

Introduction

My quoted title is from Ronald Blythe's book *Talking to the Neighbours*. Just a voice, modest, holding out, quiet. And what a long time. Blythe was born in the west Suffolk village of Acton in 1922, and he is now 97. On his father's side he was descended from East Anglian shepherds, farm workers and farmers, while his mother was a nurse from London. His father fought at Gallipoli in the Suffolk Regiment. Ronald Blythe was educated at Sudbury in Suffolk, and was conscripted during the Second World War. The author of classics like *Akenfield*, *The View in Winter*, or *Word from Wormingford*, for a long period his books came out almost every year. He has lived most of his life in East Anglia, working initially as a reference librarian in Colchester, and assisting in the launching of the Aldeburgh Festival. Exceptionally well connected in artistic and literary circles, as we shall see, he became a full-time writer from 1955. Essays, short stories, novels, poetry, writing for the BBC, a weekly column in the *Church Times*, oral history works, critical introductions, and a distinctive genre of local writing followed. He is a lay reader in the Anglican Church. He has published over thirty-three books, as well as his poetry,[1] and been instrumental in others. For many decades he has lived at Bottengoms Farm, Wormingford, Essex, which he inherited from the painter John Nash. He wrote in *Field Work* of 'what has been important to me, East Anglia, literature, Anglicanism, and my artist and writer friends'.[2] He and Richard Mabey are now Britain's greatest living rural writers. He deserves sustained academic and scholarly attention, and this article is written as a personal appreciation of his writing and its themes.

A number of questions arise when one thinks of Ronald Blythe. What does he represent, what does his voice say about us now and in the past? Is he the last of the great parochial writers, given globalisation and its ills or potential? Or is he a salutary reminder of the benefits of localised living and awareness, of the social and ecological quality of life gleaned from intimately known areas? Some might wonder if he is one of the last extensive writers of English Christianity, as church after church closes, or whether he presages a future of revived faith and biblical inspiration. How does

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his writing fit in the context of English literature and wider historiography? These are large questions, and the fact that one is asking them bears witness to his importance.

It may be convenient to arrange his wide-ranging writings in the following thematic manner. There were *The Stories of Ronald Blythe* (1985), *Immediate Possession* (1961), and his novels *A Treasonable Growth* (1960) and *The Assassin* (2004). Then there is his more formal history writing, *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties, 1919–40* (1963) and his *Divine Landscapes* (1986). One thinks next of the oral history studies, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969) and *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age* (1979), books that he is perhaps most famous for. There is his more recent *The Time by the Sea: Aldeburgh, 1955–58* (2013), his memories of that period and the people he associated with then, while living in or near to Aldeburgh on the Suffolk coast. That book further explores the locale of his novel *A Treasonable Growth*.

Finally, there is what I shall term the parish writing, notably emanating from Wormingford on the Suffolk-Essex border, some of which he refers to as 'The Wormingford Trilogy'. These are often in a calendrical and liturgical year format, and sometimes are quite contemplatively religious in tone. I include in this parish genre his *Word from Wormingford: A Parish Year* (1997), *Out of the Valley: Another Year at Wormingford* (2000), *The Circling Year: Perspectives from a Country Parish* (2001), *Talking to the Neighbours: Conversations from a Country Church* (2002), *Borderland* (2005), *A Year at Bottengoms Farm* (2006), *River Diary* (2008) *The Bookman's Tale* (2009), *At the Yeoman's House* (2011), *Village Hours* (2012), *Under a Broad Sky* (2013), *In the Artist's Garden: a Wormingford Journal* (2015), and *Stour Seasons* (2016).

In between these five major types of writing there have been many essays and edited works, relating especially to Jane Austen's *Emma*, John Clare's poetry, Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Francis Kilvert's diary, *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, and Henry James's *The Awkward Age*. Blythe's *From the Headlands*, a collection of essays, appeared in 1986, and another very fine collection, *Field Work*, in 2007. There has also been his editing of war-time writing: *Writing in a War: Stories, Poems and Essays of the Second World War* (1982), (originally published as *Components of the Scene*), and his *Private Words: Letters and Diaries from the Second World War* (1991). The above is by no means a complete list.

This article is not intended as biography, though he deserves one, and is on his prose and fictional writing. In fact, and without intruding on his private life, his biography is especially a literary one and an exploration of regional place: a love of writers and words, of a sensitively contemplative and expressive mind thinking about East Anglia and religion. He commented in a recent interview: 'I feel myself as belonging to the arts, music and literature and painting. That's my world really.'[3] His life and changing locations interpenetrate his writings and will be touched on in my discussion, which, following the nature of his work, will be wide-ranging, notably in literary reference.

The short stories and novels

Blythe admired H. E. Bates and A. E. Coppard, and his short stories developed a genre that was very popular in the mid-twentieth century. They were mainly written during the earlier periods of his literary career, some appearing in his *Immediate Possession* (1961), and the best were collected into a single substantial volume, *The Stories of Ronald Blythe* (1985). These are varied in theme, some of them even 'ghost' stories. Blythe admired M. R. James's antiquarian ghost writing, an author who was Provost of Kings College, Cambridge, and whose parents also had associations with Aldeburgh in Suffolk. Blythe's stories are precise in detail, alert to anomalies, redolent of an abandoned past. His youthful character in 'Take your partners' wants to be rescued from 'the thraldom of retrospect which binds the old',[4] though the story is about the recollection of the old, linking to Blythe's later work. The stories often feature female points of view, a sympathy

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for women exploited by men, questions of control over women and lack of amenities for them, predicaments of strong-minded women, and their no-go areas. In these respects, Blythe bears further affinity to H. E. Bates.[5] His children often appear lonely too, when dealing with adults. A frequent mood in his stories is a sense of loss and its effects, of isolation, of being apart and single, and how to move forward from such situations. One bereaved woman has lost her husband thirty years earlier, and is still trying to recreate him.[6] Yet in marriage, some of his women lead lonely lives too. In another story, a female tramp, living rough and staying in church porches, 'was alright if you left her alone'.[7] (Historians and churchgoers forget this sheltering utility of church porches in the past.) There is sympathy in these stories for the outcast woman, and for those who are socially reclusive, idiosyncratic, ugly or unusual. One unattractive woman had 'grown impervious to the involuntary flicker in the attitude of those newly making her acquaintance'.[8]

Other outcasts appear: tinners, hawkers, for example – one is reminded of the Depression migrants on the roads during Blythe's youth. He wrote in *Under a Broad Sky* of how 'this vanishing of itinerants, this now complete absence of the seasonal strangers, has played havoc with the rural short story'. Its writers have been 'robbed of the dramatic disturbance caused by the stranger on the road'.[9] He handles the loneliness of commitment, for example to religion. One story features the loneliness of the clergy, and he shows sympathy for them when they have been disliked. Hidden feelings, isolation in the face of social manners and pretensions, suppressed eroticism, are common themes in the stories. They often broach the emotional and sensual reality behind banal conversation. The stories can be amusing, as though they themselves were 'singing fairly gaily "I cover the waterfront"', a description of one of his characters.[10]

Country life is his usual focus, and he is not without a sense of 'community', as when one man recollects everyone buried in the churchyard.[11] That said, with some exceptions these stories are not usually about community, in the sense of considered multipart interactions between locally situated people. That may be because East Anglia and notably Suffolk had a particular type of 'community': loose, individualistic, suspicious, and often mismatched to the parish, owing to scattered settlement and, in many areas, large numbers of small farmers. In so far as there is a distinct East Anglian concept of 'community', it probably fits Ronald Blythe's writing rather well. Often in his work people are marginally removed from community, or marrying out of it. They face attendant cultural and personality problems akin to 'a delicate form of imprisonment'.[12] 'Community' in Ronald Blythe's early writing often appears in the form of grasping relatives, of controlling men watching a potential wife go elsewhere, or a mismatched Norfolk wife in Jewish circles in Belgravia. The emphasis is rather upon nephew-uncle relations, lonely encounters and outsiders. Indeed there is more on community in his later parish and religious writings, especially a church-focused community and of wider friends. *The Time by the Sea* (2013) has much to say about cultural friendships of shared interests, albeit among 'Selected Personalia',[13] of artists, musicians and writers. *Akenfield* had brought out wider social features, and plenty of its tensions, though *The View in Winter* often highlighted reflective isolation again.

To make a local comparison, in Adrian Bell the senses of community are strong: there is the 'farming community', its kinship groups, partnerships and learning in work, the engagement with children and their friends, a plethora of spoken speech, social events, whether in East Anglia or wartime Cumbria. Bell's 'gift for friendship', as described to me by his son Martin, is very apparent in his writing. Blythe at one point refers to Adrian Bell as 'a loquacious and idealistic person'.[14] It is a fascinating juxtaposition of two adjectives, almost as if the latter qualifies and compromises the former, as if Blythe is querying of his socially idealistic friend and neighbour: yes, but of what use, loquaciousness? It is almost Hardyesque; though while Blythe shares Hardy's emphasis upon the individual, he is spiritually far more hopeful than Hardy. And spiritual apprehension and outcomes are, after all, individualistic in our historic culture, whatever some of the Christian denominations may say to the contrary. Despite some of his views of the medieval or early modern past, Blythe would surely agree with that. The networked gregariousness of Adrian Bell is less apparent in Ronald Blythe's work, who is more individually contemplative, spiritual, biblically influenced

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and far more literary in referencing, evocative yet individually imaginative of other and earlier communities.

Blythe's leading and self-associative character Richard Brand, in his novel *A Treasonable Growth*, comments that 'I always associate life with literature.'[15] Blythe shows a very strong and often literary sense of history, and is alive to community decay or limitation, or at least to the problematical ideas of supposed past communities, and possible aspects of them in ongoing history. One also thinks of George Crabbe or John Clare in his other writing, both of them recurring presences, neither of whom felt much cause to be optimistic in their community reflections. Above all then, in his fiction, his oral history and later writings, Blythe is focused on the individual. Even in communal prayer, he is aware, 'yet again, of the reality of public worship being multiple private worship, each voice … each kneeling form contributing to the whole … this joining in whilst staying single, and yet being a "whole"'.[16]

Landscape elements are conspicuous in Ronald Blythe's fiction, as is plant life. In just three pages of one short story, for example, he refers to convolvulus, bryony, scabious, campion, fallen apples, and the effects of standing corn on a child's legs.[17] He has much sensitivity for landscape and its plants, whether writing about East Anglia, Exmoor or elsewhere. It is hardly a surprise that he formed close friendships with writers like Roger Deakin and Richard Mabey. His stories show a strong naturalistic sense of place, compassion, sympathy for all mankind and especially for women, great empathy and understanding, occasional humour, a style of gentle subtlety and tactile understatement, a recurrent question of how to move forward, and in some stories a hint of extra-presences when they seem ghostly. For the ghosts often appear as a bit of a shock in a 'ghost story' undeclared as such, Blythe's interest being in the individuals who see them. The ghosts don't reappear in his later work, unless one counts them as reimagined historical people generally – all the other qualities certainly do.

His novel *A Treasonable Growth* develops subtleties of interpersonal relations while retaining a strong sense of place. As with his early seventeenth-century historical novel *The Assassin*, it is much less concerned with themes of rurality than his later work. *A Treasonable Growth* is set in the small coastal town of Aldeburgh ('Lafney' in the novel) and a few surrounding villages. Indeed, there are some brilliant accounts here of the North Sea, that could preface a Braudelian book on it.[18] Many of Aldeburgh's details are used, such as the Martello tower, or the sounds of its sea and shingle – '*slub-slub*', hardly flattering. 'Groynes humped themselves up out of the water, black and hirsute with rubbery weeds.'[19] Indeed, in topography and in the atmosphere of its social life, Aldeburgh appears here in a less flattering light than in his later *The Time by the Sea*, even though the novel is dedicated to Christine Nash and in many ways looks forward to the later autobiographical book. Aldeburgh in the novel is socially and geographically constrained, 'with its bleak calm and orderliness', gossipy 'like bubbles from a puddle', with 'its cramped little acts', 'so tight, so complacent', its women often 'virginal and frightened'. Its inhabitants 'stayed and stayed'. 'Such architecture as there was crawled parallel to the shingle in a triple rash of grocer's Victorian'. 'There were few walks in Lafney worth the taking.' Its Martello Tower fortifications 'sagged across the beach like huge, dank hunks of fruit cake', and hundreds of people had died unhelped there of 'cholera or something'.[20] For a regional novel, this is perhaps not quite what Suffolk County Council's cultural services department might have wished for.

The novel is set in 1939, with the uncertainties of impending war: the talk of conscription, evacuation, trenches in Hyde Park, gas masks, sand-bagging of churches, and State enquiries for billeting space. Stained glass is being removed from church windows, while gummed paper to stop flying-glass lacerations from windows is selling well. A poster in a bar says: '"Save the Women from the Hun". It showed a lady in a lozenge-shaped hat criss-crossed with ospreys being chased by a gorilla.'[21] As always in Blythe, there is a vivid sense of the moods and styles of that time, of costume, manners, of 'extreme politeness … one aspect of cowardice', of the 'crippling proprieties' of the Sunday villages and cottages, let alone the dour little boys' school where Richard Brand works.[22] Other fondnesses of his later work appear: Blythburgh church, for example.[23]

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There is an intense ear for spoken language and a sense of multi-voiced social views, as with the character of the maid Hibble, and her thoughts as she serves the family. 'They were damned, she was thinking to herself, and everlasting night was waiting for them ... Then (for herself) the endless ease of Glory, the eternity with her feet up.'[24]

As in other work by Blythe, the modern twentieth century is often connected to earlier, metaphysical poetic, tradition, as in a fascinating episode when his character Richard leans over the cliff of sea-eroding Dunwich to extract a skull from the crumbling graveyard earth.[25] In fact Blythe as a historian operates fairly uniquely and with equal expertise across two main eras: that of the inter-war period, as in *A Treasonable Growth* and *The Age of Illusion*; but also of the seventeenth century, as in much of *Divine Landscapes* but especially in his *The Assassin*, which is written as an account by John Felton of his assassination in 1628 of George Villiers the Duke of Buckingham, penned in the Tower of London while awaiting execution.[26] *The Assassin* indicates very extensive research: into the 'great rebuilding' and vernacular architecture, into religion, enclosure and ideas of landscape, master-servant relations, sexual conduct, folklore, English-French comparisons, prison conditions, military casualties as dumped in towns such as Dover, the terms of contemporary speech, all replete with a Cervantes sense of seventeenth-century travel. It is easy to see, when reading *The Assassin*, why Adam Nicholson wrote about Blythe in a review of it: 'Why is this great man not more feted?'

Ronald Blythe perhaps revealed more about himself in *A Treasonable Growth* than in his other work. His leading character Richard Brand (notice the initials) most loves 'words, not deeds'; he links life to literature; he experiences 'the unfamiliar wastes of love'; boys 'later on, made their own morose encounters with women'; 'he didn't want to be a schoolmaster, he wanted to be a writer'; and his mundane occupation still allowed him 'time to work out rhyme-endings, or jot down his impressions of people and life'. He assists at a mansion's library. He tends to slip into other people's plans. The book's plot is sparse, as though its author does not need strong structures of development. Richard wonders about 'the elaborate etiquette got up by society for its protection against human warmth'.[27] The heterosexual love affair of the book is (to me) slightly abstruse, even though the book is replete with acute insights into people and originality of judgement and phraseology. As with the book's title – from Wordsworth's 'The Prelude': 'a treasonable growth of indecisive judgements, that impaired and shook the mind's simplicity' – it is tempting to apply some of this to the author himself. This novel is curiously positioned at watersheds, both in terms of the sexual changes of its decade of publication, and as a statement about impending war in 1939. Blythe comments (and notice the verb tenses here) that 'the knell of an age which is slipping away sounded so subtly and so variously that most people never hear it':

> When Bateson said, 'They're sandbagging it' [the church] Richard felt that the foundations of a barrier were being laid which was to keep him out forever from the life that had been his until that moment. It was tragic and yet it was exhilarating. He was appalled and yet made gay at the same instant. He supposed that even the most slavish traditionalist has his moments of perverse joy when all the vestiges of what he has spent a lifetime believing in are obliterated by some mighty leap in the world's progression (or retrogression). The thrill that something has 'gone' sometimes comes before the misery of knowing that one will never see it again. There is nothing so dazzling as the idea of revolution, nor any happiness so brief and questionable as that which follows one.[28]

Of course, one can read things into this beyond what Blythe probably meant in 1960, unless his prescience and contemplative abilities were extraordinary. There is little doubt, from some of his writings such as *The Age of Illusion*, about what he thought of an earlier atmosphere of stifling sexual persecution. Yet as with his other work and themes that I discuss here, it is a remarkable fact about Ronald Blythe that he writes passages (whether about locality, politics, rurality, religion, uses of history, morality, sociability or personal isolation) which throb with a predictive or

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self-validating quality via slightly different inflexions decades later. He heard things that other people didn't. To my mind, this is one of the key marks of his authorial greatness.

Akenfield and *The View in Winter*: the documentary and oral history writing

Ronald Blythe became famous with his book *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969). It has been translated into twenty languages, and was a key moment in rural studies and the development of 'oral history' in Britain. The term had hardly been coined then, though his work and its presentation had some similarities to interview-based writing by authors such as Studs Terkel in America and Tony Parker in Britain. So he was using original interviews in relatively new ways, to uncover the realities of rural life in a Suffolk village. He wrote the book more as a poet from the area than an oral historian, a term he had not heard of then.[29] He was original in method as well as reflective observation and hearing. 'This book is the quest for the voice of Akenfield, Suffolk, as it sounded during the summer and autumn of 1967', he wrote in his introduction. 'The talk covers half a century of farming slump and the beginning of what is being called the second agricultural revolution.'[30] The village was the small one of Debach, combined with the adjoining larger one of Charsfield, about ten miles from Ipswich. He called the village 'Akenfield' after the oaks, which were opposite his house there, 'acen' being Old English for oak.

An element of autobiography ran through the book, and certainly motivated it, for he was, in effect, listening to his own world talking. This was unlike many later oral historians, either because their themes and remit were wider, as in Paul Thompson's *The Edwardians*, or because their method was more 'academic' and sociological, as with Howard Newby's *The Deferential Worker*, or because their method was analytically focused upon one localised individual operating in a district well known to the author, as with Raphael Samuel's *East End Underworld*.[31] Those are three salient examples of oral history, taken from a now very expansive and varying genre, as counter-examples. A closer parallel to Blythe was the British oral historian and sociologist Tony Parker, especially in method of presentation and selective transcription. However, Parker inserted his own introductory voice much less than Blythe, and moved widely regionally and in themes – prison and mental inmates, council estates, women on the streets, a mining community, lighthouses, soldiers – and thus differs from Blythe in that regard. The Welshman and adult educationalist George Ewart Evans had been dealing with some comparable themes of Suffolk life, in a sequence of exceptional and unique books. Yet his method was again different to Blythe's, both in terms of transcription and presentation, and because he normally concentrated on quite narrow and often declining skills or issues such as horse management and folklore, the wheelwright's trade, elements of rural superstition, and so on. The methods of community studies, as pioneered from the 1940s in particular, had some influence on Blythe – he acknowledges, for example, M. W. Williams, *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth*, published over a decade earlier, which was about a Cumbrian village.[32] But again the concerns of those studies were more academic and more influenced by structural functionalism and class theory than Blythe's *Akenfield*, and much less forward with the views (Blythe: 'talk') of local people. That has in some ways hindered their surviving interest compared to *Akenfield*, given its open multi-stranded interviews with quite diverse people and its absence of a time-bound theoretical jacket.

Blythe by comparison emerged from his east Suffolk rural world, was also a regional short story writer and aspiring novelist, and was an indigenous voice. His writing probably grew as much out of an admiration for short story writers such as H. E. Bates and A. E. Coppard, than from formal history or rural sociology. He was thus in many ways a teller of stories, a relater of atmosphere and moment, a listener eager to delineate a person, and to see how that person felt about the issues facing them. He was less of a purposive academic manager of material that was grist to an argument. And in *Akenfield* they were other people's stories as told to him, which he placed into a formal context via his admirable introduction to the book, and biographical contexts through

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his perceptive and often quite lengthy introductions to each person. He continued to live in the area thereafter, unlike many academic oral historians. Talking to people seems for Blythe to have been a matter of self-discovery, a realisation of what place and Suffolk rurality meant to them and to himself.

It seems natural then, that many of the local themes and history explored in *Akenfield* are ones that echo onwards in his subsequent writing. While those writings have been very varied in style – historical, oral historical, calendrical and liturgical, Christian, religiously landscape-focused, novelistic, culturally reminiscent, or branching as an editor to the terrain of other authors (Austen, Hazlitt, Clare, Kilvert, Hardy, Henry James) – yet they maintain a thematic coherence and integrity of purpose and focus. Indeed, it could be said that his parish writing (on which more below) presents many contrasts or parallels between his own memories and thoughts and those of *Akenfield* and *The View in Winter*. His more recent reflections often relate interestingly to those of his earlier oral historical writing, as for example in discussing how newcomers fail to 'fit in' to rural communities.[33] These journal style books are his own 'view in winter' now, given that he is nearly one hundred years old, his own lane of oaks revealed as recollection and accumulated wisdom. Once again, this is Blythe usually writing about, telling stories about, comparing, trying to understand, his region of East Anglia and himself within it.

Akenfield was then a telling moment in Blythe's writing. It was in many ways a social history of east Suffolk from about 1890 to the 1960s, almost as though co-written by Blythe and his interviewees, though he described it later as 'my view of things'.[34] This was an inclusive, wide, non-elite dominated, bottom-up form of rural history, indeed 'history from below' before the term was coined, though such a form of rural history had precedents.[35] Blythe included some people from a more elite position: a female magistrate, a brigadier, for example; but nobody could suggest that the book has an upper- or middle-class bias. The changes in tone, diction and viewpoints make it all the more readable and compelling. As every historian or sociologist knows, generalising from a diversity of voices can be demanding. A great range of people, from within such a small area, from both genders, feature in the book. There are rural labourers, shepherd, farmers, bellringer, gravedigger, poet, blacksmith, Civil Defence Organiser, nurse, magistrate, veterinary surgeon, NUAW secretary, farm student, Chairman of the WI, headmistress and schoolmasters, rural dean, Baptist minister, and others. Blythe allows these people to speak, some of them contradicting each other, yet many of them reiterating certain views about the nature of change and the earlier interwar situation.[36] The cumulative local knowledge on display was formidable. As a result there is no finer book available on the East Anglian agricultural and community predicaments of the 1960s, and on the historical depth to the issues arising then.

Those issues were fairly clear. Thirty thousand agricultural workers were leaving British agriculture every year during the mid 1960s. Memories of the interwar depression had been strongly retained, coupled with a sense of bitterness at the abandonment of British agriculture to world market forces after the First World War. Some people had been completely worn down by their experiences in that period. And many labourers had, in the past, literally been worked to death.[37] Blythe later wrote that the agricultural depression then had formed his left-leaning politics.[38] Land had been abandoned, cottages often fell into dereliction, the decline of the nineteenth-century great estates had continued, new farmers came down from Scotland trying to make East Anglian agriculture succeed, taking advantage of very low rents and land prices. 'Empty cottages and tumbledown farms were part of the drama of my childhood', Blythe later wrote.[39] Memories of autocratic and dismissive employer behaviour make a shocking entry at many points into *Akenfield*, and they seem more deplorable to read now than when I first read the book, back in the early 1970s. The nature of the class system and its local subjections even shaped something akin to a Suffolk rural personality, which Blythe often tries to put his or his interviewees' fingers on: deferential, slow or averse to talk, defensive, precautionary and rather secretive.

The Second World War had then initiated sweeping changes in the scale and management of agriculture, with the county War Agricultural Committees, compulsory re-use or confiscation of

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land, intensified mechanisation, the decline of the horse, and further rationalisation of farm use. There were subsequent changes in demand for food, land organisation, the 1947 Agriculture Act, rural training programmes, the experience of education, the roles of women, access to personal mobility, and the location of small industries. Many older contentious issues persisted. Postwar out-migration was a continuation of much longer trends, dating back over a century. Rural demography was also 'catching up' with developments among the urban middle classes. Tied cottages were still a fraught matter.[40] Low wages were endemic to agriculture. Upward mobility of labourers to the status of farmers remained highly unlikely. The decline of rural crafts spawned a host of commentators. Almost all were concerned with the question of a 'country civilisation' or culture. Some worried about notions of an 'organic community' and its decline. The spread of suburbia into the countryside, and the in-movement of differing classes of commuting or retiring people, produced new debates about belonging, fitting in or social absorption, class, housing availability, and culture tensions. 'Rural community', its existence or what had happened to it, was a pronounced issue. The question of 'rural regeneration' was variously defined throughout the period from c. 1880 to the 1960s, by a host of disparate commentators. *Akenfield* came chronologically on top of, and had to handle, all these issues and changes superimposed on the second agricultural revolution. It was a commentary on them, part of an answer, and perhaps often a rather bleak answer too. Many thought that personal development was not to be sought in agricultural work, and their views were well represented in *Akenfield*. In short, and without ever setting itself up as such, the book was a superb corrective to many perennial English notions of idyllic pastoral.

Even so, I am struck upon re-reading it how some of Blythe's interviewees find grounds for self-congratulation, and look forward, plan ahead, talk of their prospects, discuss new agricultural training, and envisage the future. This book, unlike all conventional history and most sociology, was one that also addressed people's hopes and aspirations for the future. Such questions were part of Blythe's interviewing agenda and personal curiosity, a curiosity about himself too, lurking now unseen behind the edited speech transcriptions that make the book so readable. The book did this while relating those hopes to what had been, and seeing the constant interrelation between these two dimensions. Past and future: this is a moment in time; capture it now, move watchfully with the times. There were often grounds for personal satisfaction, as for example in the minds of some farmers from the hard interwar period who had turned farms from slurry grounds into smart organisational successes. They realised that eventually things did come good or better. This had been true for many of the Scottish migrant farmers of the 1930s. Postwar food shortages with rationing restrictions placed farmers in a powerful bargaining position with the government. Hence the generous price guarantees in the 1947 Agriculture Act and subsequently. Unfortunately, for other locals there was a sense that farmers had become too powerful after 1945. For many, this must have seemed an ever-present rural reality, yet another unfortunate continuation from the past. This was a motive to move out, let us say to become a midwife or car mechanic in Ipswich. It is surprising too, how few political options seemed available. In one stinging phrase, hitting the reader as many of the statements do, a schoolmaster comments: 'Politics to them is a kind of necessary function which stinks'.[41]

One of the striking features of *Akenfield* was its shifts in tone and method. The introduction is historical-sociological writing, setting the scene, from the 1086 Domesday Book onward: occupations, population, houses, with official government agricultural returns from 1936 and 1966. It then moves into Blythe's introductions to each person and their edited talking, covering a wide variety of people. In one case that comprises a conversation between two men. Yet it also inserts a lengthy folktale told in Suffolk dialect, which has 'a gentle sing-song intonation which is allied with a pithy toughness'. '"That oon't dew me noo good if I dew" says she.'[42] '"Suffolk" being my first language, so to speak', Blythe wrote later.[43] His interest in education (he has been a local school governor) also shows, when he quotes at length from the school logbooks for 1876 to 1941.[44] Then again, there is quite lengthy citation of the 'Diary of the Akenfield fruit harvest'.[45] There is artistry,

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initiative and originality in this kind of presentation, free of much academic convention. Despite the dialectal folktale, the book was also occasionally criticised for its formal rendition and selection of speech, as for example in an interesting article by Raphael Samuel.[46] Yet Blythe only really followed the transcribing conventions of Studs Terkel or Tony Parker, both very famous oral historians who sometimes edited their interviewees much more than Blythe does.[47] Indeed many other oral historians have done the same. It contributed to its readability and accessibility, for the book would otherwise have been unwieldy in length. An' lork, likeliest Blythe doon't want ha' wholly streight talken hare, fur 'e thowt that there kewrious heerd speech ud mek thar hid'll goo off – it could stumble readers, could ramble, altercate, be laconic or misunderstood. Indeed it could be disparaged at that time for its dialect. His presentation of each person is always respectful, discerning, and he did his best in every case to present, and to preserve the dignity and readability, of his interviewees.

Pitched outside many of the academic debates, *Akenfield* had an envied influence that must have been salutary to many academics. The moving 1975 film of the book on which Blythe collaborated with Peter Hall compounded its impact. Not many academic historians or commentators working on rural societies have had Ronald Blythe's level of popular appeal (perhaps Le Roy Ladurie, Peter Laslett or E. P. Thompson),[48] but they may not match Blythe's readership and his book has been continually in print ever since. Its importance was borne out in 2006 with the appearance of Craig Taylor's fine study, *Return to Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village in the Twenty-first Century*.[49] In many ways, that was a valuable continuum from *Akenfield*, bringing the story up to date, using similar oral history methods. Radical changes in agriculture had continued. The farming labour force had constantly declined in size. Farm technology had advanced further and even become computerised. Food production and supply chains were ever more internationalised, and it would take Brexit and the coronavirus to begin seriously to question that. The average age of farmers was now over sixty, indeed sixty-eight for livestock farmers. Commuting had become a staple feature of villages. Shortages of housing and high prices made a past of dereliction and run-down cottages seem barely believable. The idea of 'community' that had been so debated in the 1960s was now often shelved altogether: people no longer needed each other, many thought, as they charged around in their excessive cars on mega-shopping visits to supermarkets. Foreign workers from Poland, Portugal, or other EU nations needful of such wages could do less desirable agricultural work. Ronald Blythe would have interviewed such people had they been present in 1967. In fact, their stories are crying out for British oral historians to record. But in the twenty-first century they usually found themselves segregated in farm-located portacabins. Farm worker status and wages remain low. In a Leicestershire village near me, a very isolated run-down portacabin is currently for rent near a poultry battery unit. The indicative sign, on an unmanned but distrustful eggs-for-sale hut, reads: 'Condition poor, so rent negotiable. Suit a farm worker or gamekeeper.' Not much changes, it seems. Multiple benefices, diocesan funding crises, embarrassing issues of the parochial 'contribution', lowly-paid women clergy, church and churchyard closures, chapel dereliction or conversions to dwellings, and the like reflect the decline in religious belief. The Suffolk accent was more appreciated, as a supposed lingering ticket into rurality. The farming world, pared back into ever-smaller pockets in the face of all the newcomers, withdrew more into itself. Almost all these and related features were presaged or well underway in *Akenfield*, showing how well Blythe did his work. Craig Taylor's *Return to Akenfield* underscored that fact so clearly, and in doing so his book reiterated the value of *Akenfield*: as a book looking forward in anticipation, as well as an oral history looking backwards.

Blythe's empathy is apparent again in *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age*, as is his erudition and cleverness as an interviewer. This is his other famous oral history book. It is, I think, among his very best books. On the literary aspects of old age, he perceptively comments on 'the low lying literature of old age', on how 'the subject has a way of being fugitive, of being little seen even where it is profusely represented',[50] as in its voluminous poetry. He takes the reader from the Greek writers onwards, through such authors as the Grimm brothers, Hans Andersen, Emile

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Cammaerts, Kenneth Grahame, Albert Schweitzer, Charles Dickens, John Cowper Powys and others. The book is in some ways a continuation of *Akenfield*, despite its concentration on the themes of old age. Comparable statements about the past treatment of servants and labourers appear.[51] There is further acute observation of twentieth-century rural change, the nature of village life, and how others see the past and present. 'I do possess a compassionate sense of time, and what it does to each one of us', Blythe writes in his 2004 foreword. He discusses the psychological separation of country people born at the juncture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with those born fifty years later. 'Sentimentalists like to describe all this as contentment and to read contentment in the hard, strong, brown old faces which so often are weathered masks hiding collapse, fear and wonder.'[52]

Blythe had, to some extent, taken on board comments about the slightly formalised relaying of diction, as there is greater readiness to display the East Anglian accents and colloquialisms. Or perhaps here he was simply moving with the times, ten years on from *Akenfield*, as dialect became more acceptable or even requisite, supposedly as a sign of integrity, in British social life and public voices compared to the 1950s and 1960s. He is prescriptively acute and sensible regarding the elderly. This shows itself in many ways: on manners, the loss of one's own home, the sexuality of the elderly, issues of loneliness,[53] making comments on the running of old people's homes, or the affliction of imposed television (hospital wards should note that too). 'The old suffer cruelly from enforced television and muzak in institutions.'[54] Once more, with Ronald Blythe one thinks of all the people he has allowed to be heard, all those who one hears through him. Their voices would be absent now, were it not for him. They also endow Blythe with a polyphony that is rare in writers, adding huge depth, range of expression and experience.

The historical writing

Blythe's *Divine Landscapes* is an unusual book. For a start, it was beautifully illustrated by Edwin Smith, whose black-and-white photographs have great appeal, such is their design, texture and detail. The book stressed the parish, 'the home section of a divine cosmos',[55] as befits Blythe's *oeuvre*. Yet it had an expansive sense of divine landscapes, going beyond East Anglian sites to also encompass London and places such as Oxford, Lindisfarne, Cambridge, Salisbury, Leighton Bromswold, Woodbridge, Pendle Hill, Dauntsey, Bemerton, Westminster, Bedford, or Little Gidding. These sites were associated with Langland, Bunyan, Julian, Herbert and other religious figures, ones who often appear in Blythe's writing. 'Repelled by the vast muddy river of written theology',[56] he is drawn to a direct and immediate association with the sites and their religious associations. The book is a writer's pilgrimage, a religious tour or pilgrim's progress, a rediscovery of and immersion into key villages, towns and cities of religious culture, an avowal of the spiritual significance of places in the face of a modern world that has often chosen to forget this. Blythe's indignation at the Reformation and Counter-Reformation tortures and atrocities is very real, and makes for some harrowing reading. He laments the ignorance now of the sites where these martyrdoms occurred.[57] Places have dissociated themselves from what happened there. The book is a moving evocation of religious place, and a corrective to those who elide over the past, ignoring its religious significances. *Divine Landscapes* is a rediscovery of languages of devotion and contemplation, of hymns as popular art and expressive of weathered place, of how religion has been conveyed in buildings. It is also a tribute to the thirteen centuries of unknowable parish priests, often named and dated on scarcely regarded plaques in churches, who left their influence wherever we look or walk.

Blythe's *The Age of Illusion* is a very different kind of book.[58] ('Illusion' referred to the idea of 'peace in our time'). The interwar period has had plenty of overview books and interpretations.[59] Blythe in this book gives his own view of that period, via a sequence of well-chosen, closely researched and indicative topics that comprise each chapter. The result is a highly readable,

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revealing portrait of those decades, ones that are extremely informative for all Blythe's writing. One cannot read *Akenfield*, for example, without appreciating the background of the inter-war years.

The chapters are close vignettes illuminating the period. They are stories well told, and were probably intended as such by the author. In other ways too they are distinctive to Blythe. He is very alive to the poets, intelligentsia and periodicals of that time, in a way that many writers on the Slump are not. This is less an analysis of the financial mechanics of the gold standard, than a cultural history that is extremely well informed on the politics and economic history. The chapters take us through such episodes or characters as Amy Johnson, 'Jix' (William Joynson-Hicks), the Vicar of Stiffkey, T. E. Lawrence, the BBC, body-line bowling, the Jarrow marchers, Neville Chamberlain, George Lansbury, the Blackshirts, Wallis Simpson, the Spanish Civil War, and other such indicative themes. A sense of the developing international situation holds the book together. One can feel Blythe's indignation at the poverty, the welfare system, the reactionary politics, and the repressive state of public opinion and the ways it was cultivated. Occasionally this book is boldly amusing, for example in the account of 'the prostitutes' padre' from Stiffkey (in north Norfolk) and the trouble he raised for the Church of England. After all, the Magdalen's repentance had a convincing Christian resonance going back to Mr Gladstone and Jesus, so the Revd Harold Davidson in his weekly London forays saw himself on concrete ground. The East Anglian–London excursus and connection (in both directions) has a long history. In studies like this, the book is vividly alive on the diverse personalities, and broad in themes. Many of Blythe's later topics emerge: the nature of neighbourliness, the issues of community, the open road, or senses of belonging.

Few interwar studies rival this book for informative readability, for evoking an historical atmosphere, and Blythe's choices of evidence and symptomatic quotations make it original throughout. As always with Blythe, because of his cultural understandings, he has an adroit way of alighting on things that come to have a wonderful predictive quality years later. I am writing during the coronavirus 'lockdown' in April to May 2020, with massive UK state controls seemingly modelled on Chinese precedent, with economic disintegration and over a quarter of all workers being paid by Boris Johnson's Tory government. So my favourite example in this book is the following: '"When England goes Communist," said Douglas Goldring sceptically, "no doubt the party in power will call itself the 'Conservative Co-operative Party' and, as usual, half the Government will be Old Etonian"'.[60] Blythe published this book nearly sixty years ago, in 1963.

The Wormingford books

Ronald Blythe opens one of his liturgical, Advent to Advent, books, *The Circling Year: Perspectives from a Country Parish* (2001), as follows:

> Here are some of the addresses which I have read, rather than preached, at Matins and Evensong in three country churches on the Essex bank of the River Stour … [Wormingford, Little Horkesley, and Mount Bures]. A writer is a storyteller and here are my retellings of scripture. A writer is a 'voice', and here is my voice as it has been familiarly heard for a long time, bringing together as best I could my delight in language, my recollections of farming, my constant reading, my recognition of neighbours, and my hopes that what I have found in faith will be useful to the friends who so politely hear me out Sunday after Sunday … Being the local writer, it has been expected of me to add my own words to what has been said in church here for ages, and these are some of them.[61]

These local liturgical and country calendrical forms of his writing originated in a series that Ronald Blythe wrote for the *Church Times*, on a weekly basis, alongside his readings in churches

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as outlined above. Some of the books are focused mainly upon the Bible, church and religion, others are more rural and calendrical, weekly journals while living in the Stour valley, notably covering the period from 1992 to now. These latter deal more with extra-church matters, though all are infused with his religious faith and interpretation, and all traverse local country life in their repertoire. I shall regard them together here, comprising a large body of writing, in which the local, the rural and the religious are intertwined, to differing degrees. A sense of the seasonal is also ever-present in Blythe. They comprise an impressive sequence of books, such as *Out of the Valley: Another Year at Wormingford* (2000), *Word from Wormingford* (1997), *The Circling Year: Perspectives from a Country Parish* (2001), or *Talking to the Neighbours: Conversations from a Country Parish* (2002).

These are some of the most vivid, detailed, localised, wide-ranging books on rural England of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In some ways they develop his documentary writing and oral history, most notably in *Akenfield* and *The View in Winter*, as the views of his friends and the perspectives on local people are often prominent.

Such writing had long antecedents. Blythe's books on the parish, as a 'country calendar' and often liturgical style, approximate to a genre of this form of writing. Some of that was poetical, notably in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when poetry often adopted many of the functions that prose subsequently took over. One thinks of James Thomson's 'The Seasons' of 1730, much expanded in 1744 and 1746, a lengthy poem of nature description, detailed in its observations of birds, landscape and rural life. As for Blythe, a benevolent God was instrumental in this. Robert Bloomfield, author of another famous calendrical poem, 'The Farmer's Boy' (1800), was a Suffolk poet of a lowly background, born in Honington in 1766. His extended poem relied on Suffolk pronunciation for some of its rhymes, and showed strong affinities to the countryside. Another example of such work was John Clare's 'The Shepherd's Calendar', influenced by 'The Seasons', as well as by Milton, Bunyan, and folksong and ballads. Much of his writing emanated from or in connection with the fen-edge parish of Helpston, proximate to East Anglia. The intimate sense of place in Clare is comparable to that of Blythe in Wormingford, even their respective senses of loss or dismay sometimes have a curious parallelism. William Howitt's *Book of the Seasons; or, the Calendar of Nature* (1830, and with further writing for later editions) was a prose-form calendar, fuller in detail, closely observant and having a sense of the wonder of Nature, describing agricultural life, changes of the seasons, feeding and comforting animals, watchful of insects, and with passages on bird migration that are reminiscent of Gilbert White. The latter was the subject of a fine biography by Blythe's friend Richard Mabey.[62] Ronald Blythe himself wrote an excellent introduction to H. Rider Haggard's *A Farmer's Year; Being his Commonplace Book for 1898*.[63] Indeed, I wonder whether he had himself in mind when he wrote in that introduction about Rider Haggard: 'Perhaps more novelists should be set to producing reports on social change.'[64] After all, as a novelist he had already done that with *Akenfield*. One could add many more, and more modern, 'calendrical' works of this kind, such as Henry Williamson's *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941),[65] A. G. Street's *Country Calendar* (1935),[66] H. J. Massingham's *An Englishman's Year* (1948),[67] Roger Deakin's *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* (2008),[68] through to the recent books by Mark Cocker, often originating in calendrical newspaper articles, with Cocker's seasonal diaries focused especially upon Claxton in Norfolk.[69] And in relation to rural seasonal changes, a large number of diarists also come to mind, such as Francis Kilvert.[70] Blythe develops this diverse tradition in his own distinctive ways, from his parochial base and farmhouse on the Essex-Suffolk border.

'Fortunate the writer or artist whose parish is his universe', wrote Blythe, opening a chapter on the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown. While Blythe is one of those who 'carry our parochiality with us', he is evidently 'Of this parish'. His statement about a fortunate writer applies to much of his own work.[71] This writing also augments the long sequence of parish writing, personally documenting the parish as a variably assessed community. One thinks here of John Galt's *Annals of the Parish*,[72] or Crabbe's 'The Borough'. There was John Clare's 'The Parish: a Satire' and many

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other poems by him: 'Clare the ultimate parish voice of England', wrote Blythe, 'the poet who was able to make village limitations illimitable, [who] was both the prisoner and the free spirit of parochialism, both narrowly confined and liberated.'[73] Or there are some of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy's novels. Much of George Sturt's work, or that by George Ewart Evans, and indeed *Akenfield* itself sit in this evolving tradition of parish writing. For surely, it should be seen as *evolving*, as changing in its terms of reference, justifications or constraints, and not as a static timeless option of bordered local space. That said, and surely acknowledged, there is yet another agenda opened up that involves analysis of Blythe's writing. A great many regional novelists whose focus was often in effect the parish have all fortified this changing genre. The list would be extensive, for example many works by Eden Phillpotts, Sheila Kaye-Smith, T. F. Powys, H. W. Freeman, Mary Mann, and D. H. Lawrence would be among them, when their locale was the parish and its immediate surroundings.

Blythe's work also clearly fits into a lineage of East Anglian writing, and to judge from his literary allusions forms a conversation with it. The writing on rural life in East Anglia is exceptionally voluminous, and Blythe frequently refers to it. He also has as a visual touchstone the artists of the region, notably Gainsborough, Constable and John Nash. Among the East Anglian authors he mentions, if I may adopt a wide definition of that region, are George Herbert, Crabbe, Adrian Bell, Margery Allingham, Hugh Barrett, Mary Mann, M. R. James, L. P. Hartley, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Henry Williamson, and his friends Edward Storey, Roger Deakin and Richard Mabey. It is perhaps less usual that non-East Anglian authors enter into his discussion, though they are widely there, such as Wordsworth, Kilvert, Laurie Lee, Auden, or some of those chosen for study in his *Divine Landscapes*. This almost hints at a kind of East Anglian exceptionalism and a unique stand-alone regional tradition of writing on this largely arable and often coastal region. Such an impressive literary array has been further augmented in recent decades by the Cambridge-based Robert Macfarlane, and by the University of East Anglia landscape historian Tom Williamson. Within such a formidable scope of authors Blythe is a very important figure, as so many reviews, sales, and literary estimations attest, let alone the film 'Akenfield'. He is often referred to as Britain's finest living rural writer, and that is also in part a tribute to the regional tradition that has nurtured him.

Ronald Blythe then can be situated in a number of traditions of East Anglian and local reflective writing: regional, rural, liturgical, calendrical and parochial. Yet he is quite different to these other authors, for a variety of reasons. Unlike, say Thomas Hardy, Adrian Bell, or Laurie Lee, let alone practical men of agriculture like A. G. Street, he writes in these parish books as a committed Christian, and a lay Reader in his local church. 'How hard it is in today's countryside to retain the old relevance, to keep the Faith and not the theme-park', he wrote.[74] Many of his themes, such as solitude, faith and recovery from loss, are contemplative and purposefully religious. This places him closer to authors like George Crabbe, perhaps Francis Kilvert, T. S. Eliot, H. J. Massingham,[75] certainly R. S. Thomas (to whom *in memoriam* he dedicated his book *Borderland*), or the agricultural union leaders and autobiographers like Joseph Arch and George Edwards of the late nineteenth century. This faith is very open and prominent in his parish writing, permeating his approaches to local life. Religion with him is seen through poetry and architecture, showing a love of liturgy and an aesthetic fondness for churches. Many of his travels are also faith-related. This 'religious' aspect of his writing in the parochial books may attract, or distract, some readers. After all, his publisher is often 'the Canterbury Press, Norwich, a publishing imprint of Hymns Ancient & Modern Limited, a registered charity', who, by the way, always do him proud, for the books are lovely to hold, view and read.

Biblical allusion, lessons and comparisons are often found in his parochial writing, which jumps laterally between the scriptures and the issues and observations that he makes about the modern parish and wider world. The Apostles, and many people of the Old Testament, are very real to him. He brings them into his writing directly, without any biblical scholasticism or theological debate intervening. His religion is of the Bible, personally read and interpreted, of

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scriptural stories and personalities taken to heart and reflected on. The Bible to him involves many local things happening to rural people. There is almost nothing in his writings concerning the Anglican Church authorities, its hierarchy, its politics, its incumbency issues or higher ambitions. He refers at one point to 'the gossip and clerical trivia', though he clearly loves the Church.[76] There is an absence of reference to biblical commentaries and scholastic study of the Bible by others. He shows high respect for religious buildings and their history, and that is both contemplative and physical in appreciation. His writing often shifts from the Bible and the very early history of Christianity, to subsequent history, and to local events and a religiously influenced interpretation of his current surroundings. I suppose that the religiously knowledgeable with a disposition to categorise might see him as 'low church' Anglican, notably through his direct reading of the Bible and his sense of a personal Christ, though any such label seems to me to be needlessly constraining of a thinker with such a great range of reference and sympathies. For he appears equally appreciative of John Bunyan, George Herbert, Thomas Traherne, Cardinal Newman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, R. S. Thomas, and many others. He admires Tractarian art. He quotes Lewis Carroll approvingly, who wrote that as he gets older 'the petty distinctions of the many creeds of Christendom tend to slip away as well – leaving only the great truths which all Christians believe alike'.[77] However one views Blythe's religion (and one could write an article on that and its place in his writing), his written faith does set him apart from many other rural writers, and especially more recent authors, for whom the Bible and its characters seem not to be much of an inspiration in writing.

This 'country calendar and reflections' form of writing in Blythe's case is extraordinarily erudite. The range of allusion and comparison is awesome, yet never has such learning been so lightly carried and gently used. I was so struck by this, that I began listing in the back of each book the authors, poets and artists who he refers to, partly for my own future self-instruction, and the lists are lengthy. He clearly has some favourites, who occur across this style of his writing. George Herbert, John Clare, Bunyan, Traherne, Hardy, G. M. Hopkins, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Proust, Wordsworth, Cowper, Auden, Edward Storey, seem among his favourites – indeed he dedicated a book to the latter poet. But the list is far longer, and takes one from the early Celtic church to Mother Julian, through many more up to George Mackay Brown and Seamus Heaney, to authors and friends such as Richard Mabey and Roger Deakin. And among Blythe-liked painters are Gainsborough, Constable, Palmer, Chagall (see the windows of Tudeley church),[78] the Nash brothers, and Mary Newcomb whose works often illustrate his books.

Such erudition is self-inculcated, eclectic, often following his Christian faith, historical, literary, poetical, exceptionally wide in scope. It is unlike the learning and debate engagements of many academics, with their closely argued texts and articles, replete with extensive notes, focused fairly tightly on certain themes, historical issues or episodes. Blythe's erudition is very personally interpretive, touchingly engaged, sympathetic, expansive, non-argumentative, calmly indifferent to (and seemingly unknowing of) any rival viewpoints, often linked to friendship or contemplative association.

Historians are prone to lateral thinking, the making of comparisons, over time or space, to contextualise and illuminate. Yet within short spans of text, I have rarely found an author capable of such extensive lateral reference, who yet succeeds in keeping his prose succinct, compelling and non-chaotic.[79] This is both Ronald Blythe's unique stylistic signature and the key to his holistic view of the world. The jumps across space, time, episodes and authors in Blythe are truly striking, and for me this is part of his charm as a writer. One sees the brief title of each short (two to five-page) chapter, and wonders where will this one go and take me? It will almost always contain surprises, linkages of theme, experience, reading and personnel that could never be anticipated. This is the nature of Blythe's originality. Readers are on a journey into his experience and erudition, carried by his attractive personality, into a world of gentle decency and good judgement, down paths of reflection not yet known, into a meditative field of frequent isolation, and like

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Bunyan's Christian they are about to find some captivating and unexpected junctures of knowledge and terrain.

Here's an example, which I choose at random, from a chapter of five pages in *Talking to the Neighbours*.[80] This one is headed 'A Saxon Tragedy'. It starts off with Willa Cather's novel called *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, hitherto unknown to me. It then take us to Thomas Beckett, a predecessor I'd never heard of named Alphege (whom Blythe has 'always been fascinated by'), onwards to Archbishop Luwum of Uganda (I'm reassured, I've lived there), back to Celtic priests, Henry II, forward to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his Gestapo murderers, back to Danish invaders and the Danegeld, and King Cnute, onto the Circle Line on the London underground – that's a surprise – thence to Tower Hill, then Westminster Abbey, and the chapter ends with a moving execution-night poem by Bonhoeffer. Phew!

The next chapter – 'Brother Nature', five pages of text – starts off in 1225, the year before St Francis died, with discussion of him, and moves the reader through Christ's experience of the countryside (there's an original theme), local ecology, the *Benedicte*, *Genesis*, Blythe's farmhouse, Wiston church, Norman wall paintings, the Herefordshire clergyman Thomas Traherne, Hereford Cathedral (I know it well), issues of the Church and Pantheism (I'm now taking notes for my research into gravestones and the natural world), rural Palestine, spoliation of the environment, William Wordsworth, and the Book of Psalms, always a favourite with Blythe and which he defends elsewhere with vigour. The text enwraps a naive painting of three jays by Mary Newcomb. It is almost as if the childlike wonderment and appreciation of this East Anglian painter is a state of creativity to be emulated by the author, disguising and downplaying his evident knowledge, aspiring to simplicity of address, surely communicating to a very wide readership, in a diction of simple faith that is massively well informed. The linkages are poetical, not academic, and in this author they flow in complete naturalness, simplicity, and to greatly compelling effect. They criss-cross areas of most readers' knowledge, as I've indicated for myself, but then supply alternative routes and ideas not known. Ronald Blythe achieves reader engagement via this lateral thinking across personally meaningful subjects, some of which the reader will surely relate to, as well as his discussion of the tactile world and seasons around him.

This is, I think, a fluid style and method of delivery (often intended as a spoken delivery in church, which necessitates extra care), in which Blythe has few rivals among the hitherto writers of rural journals. Marked by deep history, it is almost timeless and free-floating in his mind upon writing. In part this is because he has a strong sense of the closeness of history. 'Roman bricks hold our church tower together.'[81] It is as if Cnute is as meaningfully present as Bonhoeffer, or that Christ, St Francis and Nature are current alongside Richard Mabey and his *Flora Britannica*. We are talking friends here, that is how it reads. And every chapter is different, in theme and reference, and indeed across many books penned in this style. One reads on, wondering where he will take you next in his arena of personally treasured knowledge.

Blythe thus reminds me of a few of the Welsh Methodist preachers of my youth: he has attained a state of expressive and erudite grace that appears to know few bounds of possibility. Writing from Bottengoms Farm, Wormingford, the local has become the universal. He does not drive, and has not adopted computers, email or the Internet. And so the overloading of extraneous matter, the distractions from reading and writing, the pulls away from personal choices, have not congested his writing, extracting him from his own spontaneous associations, substituting lines of thought or material that are less intrinsic to him but which may seem objectively suitable via Internet delivery. His is the self-supplying village shop, sourcing locally and uniquely, peopled by a few well known faces, as compared with the predictable mass supplies of the large globalised supermarket and its anonymous queues. He is the watchful rural pedestrian, as the heavy get-out-my-way 4x4s and SUVs bulldoze by. No one walks and talks, it's just cars now, one interviewee complained in *Akenfield*.[82] He would be dismayed by the way that has developed since. Blythe echoes the sentiment: if only the clergy would walk, he says.[83] Pedestrian-like, localised, comparatively isolated, relatively media-free, of a very contemplative disposition, he is thus

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enabled to keep his own highly personal attachment to a selectively gained and cherished array of knowledge and experience. That knowledge is *meaningful to him*, pondered by him, and selectively augmented by him, in ways that a plethora of Internet and mass media-derived knowledge may often not be to others. Are we are being computerised into incomprehension, all our senses dulled? Why do some writers produce work of over-lengthy spread-out blandness, in which a reader senses inconsequential engagement, a fast-scanned eye, accumulation for the sake of it, while other writers maintain a distinctive, original and unique voice of real integrity, original connectivity and careful choice? There are surely lessons here, in how one engages with the sources of knowledge.

The earlier parish writing had highlighted changes affecting the village, or the urban locality in the genre's town equivalents. John Clare had centred poems on agricultural enclosure. His 'The Parish: a Satire' had handled themes of local politics and inequality, as, very differently, had twentieth-century novels like Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936). Shelia Kaye-Smith's *The End of the House of Alard* (1923) had dealt with the predicament of the great estates, as had some of Constance Holme's books. Other novels had as their main themes the interwar depression and its local effects.[84] Blythe's parish writing, as in *Akenfield*, brings us up to date with rural parish life in East Anglia and also with that area of parish activity linked to the Anglican Church. The relatively low church attendances, the issues of combined benefices, the solicitation concerning elderly churchgoers, the questions of church buildings, the annual festivities like the harvest home – and their historical antecedents – have quite a salient place in his Wormingford books. He often brings the Bible to bear on these issues. Then, in respect of modern concerns, there are questions about the nature of community, of the effects of travel and incomers. And there is the relation of such a village to proximate towns like Ipswich or Felixstowe, and the high mechanisation of farming and the fewer numbers working in it. The array of issues that he broaches is much wider even than this. There is no doubt that future historians and readers will cherish and return to these books for insights into the changes affecting village and Christian life during this crucial period of the second agricultural revolution, at the end of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first century.

The time by the sea

In 2013 Blythe published *The Time by the Sea*, his memories of living along the Suffolk coast between 1955 and 1958. The period was crucially formative for him. He was writing his short stories and first novel *A Treasonable Growth* (1960). This occurred under the influence of some remarkable people, and they included leading cultural figures. They recognised his talents in their friendships with him. Among these people were the composers and musicians Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Imogen and Gustav Holst, Eric Crozier, Malcolm Arnold, Martin Shaw, Hephzibah Menuhin, the writers E. M. Forster, Mervyn Peake, Sylvia Townsend Warner, John Lehmann, Adrian Bell, James Turner, the artists John Nash and his wife Christine, Cedric Morris, Arthur Lett-Haines, Mary Potter, Maggi Hambling, the photographer Kurt Hutton who he worked with on East Anglian projects, and the film director Peter Hall. Salient among the events in *The Time by the Sea* were the early formative years of the Aldeburgh Festival, in which Blythe played a key role. Aldeburgh and its hinterland assumes a leading place in these memories of the 1950s, as a 'little inner society'.[85] Blythe also stayed at Wormingford with John and Christine Nash, and in places like Thorpeness and Debach.

Blythe's account of these personalities during a remarkable period of creativity, and of the spirit of locality that surrounded them, is among his best writing. They frequently made a parsimonious living. As such a fine evocation of place and of creativity with other people, this charming book is probably my favourite of all his writing. He tells of how artistic friendship enhances a sense of place. I'm reminded of A. G. Street's statement that he 'had reached the age when one becomes

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aware that friendship is the most valuable thing in life'.[86] For anyone familiar with the region and its recent history, *The Time by the Sea* is irresistible. 'Listening has been a large part of my craft', he writes in the book's opening sentence.[87] Blythe is an extremely telling judge of personality and the nature of creativity, and of the interactions between people whom he admired. In showing what appealed to them about himself, he displays his own character well. He emerges as adaptable, charming, enthusiastic, always listening, open to ideas, loving of music and local churches, aspirant as a writer, and good looking. He refers to himself as 'completely localised', and they all tolerated 'my constant talk of Suffolk'.[88] He is also highly appreciative of women, such as Imogen Holst, and they were evidently very supportive of him.[89]

The line between discretion and revelation is a fine one, carefully judged here, for he shows respect for people's privacy. I find this entirely understandable. His self-doubt emerges in places: where was home, where was he going, and with whom, and how justified were some expectations of those around him? 'I was in great company, although staying solitary all the same.'[90] Despite the social contexts and the friendships – and as notably in his empathetic *View in Winter* and his Wormingford writing – this book also reveals the solitary Ronald Blythe, the isolated and gifted writer, and a discreet person. For he is reserved about relationships that have intrigued some commentators on these Aldeburgh-linked individuals. Here and elsewhere, he is wary to protect confidentiality. It is known for example that Ronald Blythe a few years later had a close relationship with Patricia Highsmith,[91] which he discussed in an interview with her biographer, but reticence on such issues was usual at that time.[92]

Music, paint and print co-exist in this book: the local panorama is very fully creative. The work is full of memorable remarks. On Cedric Morris, for example, he observes that 'Nobody has such a good time as a good-time Puritan.'[93] He is intensely observant and interesting on what the painters sought to achieve, on their working methods, and on the meaning of colour and detail to them. His resigned humour often lurks near the surface. When his guidebook to Aldeburgh wins a prize in London, with John Betjeman during the presentation sitting 'in the crypt beaming behind a pot of flowers' and assuming that the prize would go to Blythe, Canon Oram promptly grabbed the cheque for £150, saying that they needed it for the church. Blythe, impecunious and walking back towards Liverpool Street Station, 'began to rehearse the preliminary rites of Canon Oram's unfrocking'.[94] He has a sense of the deep past, into which his reveries sometimes go: the Saxons, Vikings, St Edmund, Henry VIII's sister, medieval water management, the nature of the clay or sandling landscapes, and the long reputations of the Aldeburgh marshes for 'wretchedness, superstition and crime'.[95] As in much of his other work, there is a sense of (and search for) the faith and medieval mentality that went into surviving artefacts, such as Blythburgh church, to which he pens a moving eulogy. Through into the modern period come his memories of aerodromes, and the shingle-moving Irish labourers creating runways. Always in Blythe there is the sense of the past in human relationships, and the touches of applied memory.

Yet for such an historically minded person, his view of history is humble and sometimes curiously timeless in its sweeping expansiveness. The coast and its repetitive sea-battering is a site for meditation, as well as for the cultural activity he documents. As he reflects from the cover of a windbreak on a beach: 'Our history is eventually little more than the sea's litter.'[96]

Conclusion

Blythe once wrote to me in response to some draft chapters I had sent, including on churchyard closures, that 'perhaps the 'contemplative' factor is on the low side'. It was a revealing and gently inserted phrase in an encouraging letter, in his usual carefully neat handwriting. For 'contemplative', I think that Blythe primarily means an appreciation of the role and sense of God – in history, places, people, literature, music. So I was not well suited to provide that. The term 'contemplative' goes beyond that too, at least in Blythe's writing. It is the seeing of significances, the long-term

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history, the deep past, the *meanings* of places and people then and now, the memories of places, for people, and the resonance of places. These senses and appreciation need to be uncovered, re-understood and appreciated. This is true whether one is thinking about St Benet's Abbey or a Suffolk village, Lindisfarne or Gwennap Pit in Redruth, Mother Julian or R. S. Thomas. It is unique that this historical knowledge, these cultural and sociological approaches to community and place, biblical learning, mysticism and religious outlook, become interjoined in an author. His works, spanning many years and various genres, reveal in vivid clarity how the local reflects or even (in some registers) transcends the universal.

'My main business at Wormingford', he wrote in *The Time by the Sea*, 'has been to continue in my own way what went before, but on my own terms, and as best I can. With my youth crowded with artists, these last years are a kind of fulfilled silence in which a remote old farmhouse has collaborated with an unexpected enthusiasm. So I am fortunate. I too have made a habit of looking, of really seeing.'[97] In this he is like his friend John Nash, who he quoted on this. 'These last years' have perhaps been marked by much solitude, despite his good friends, his widespread literary connections, the huge respect in which he is held, and the neighbourhood Church members – a solitude that some of his earlier research must have prepared him for. It is hard to imagine otherwise how he can have remained so productive. Yet few authors have so fulfilled another of his comments, in *Talking to the Neighbours*: 'Each of us leaves behind something valuable.'[98] Ronald Blythe certainly does.

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Notes

1 For his poetry, which I will not discuss here, see R. Blythe, *Decadal* (London, 2015).
2 R. Blythe, *Field Work* (Norwich, 2007), p. ix.
3 Interview with Ronald Blythe, by Alan Macfarlane, 31st January 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5215ieT2bU> [7th July 2020].
4 R. Blythe, *The Stories of Ronald Blythe* (1985, London, 1986), p. 203. The stories date from 1957 and thereafter in original publication.
5 On H. E. Bates, see K. D. M. Snell, *Spirits of Community: English Senses of Belonging and Loss, 1750–2000* (London, 2016), ch. 9.
6 Blythe, *Stories of Ronald Blythe*, p. 139.
7 Ibid., p. 172.
8 Ibid., p. 214.
9 Blythe, *Under a Broad Sky*, p. 105.
10 Blythe, *Stories of Ronald Blythe*, p. 212.
11 Ibid., p. 179.
12 Blythe, 'The Church Mouse', in *Stories of Ronald Blythe*, for example p. 194, is a good example of such displacement.
13 Blythe, *Time by the Sea*, pp. 241–4.
14 Ibid., p. 50. On Adrian Bell, see also Snell, *Spirits of Community*, ch. 8.
15 R. Blythe, *A Treasonable Growth* (1960, London, 2010), p. 97.
16 Blythe, *A Year at Bottengoms Farm*, p. 60.
17 Blythe, 'The Windfall', in *Stories of Ronald Blythe*, pp. 183–5. On Blythe's knowledge of the natural world, see also R. Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey through Trees* (London, 2007), p. 41.
18 Most notably, the stunning passages of Blythe, *Treasonable Growth*, p. 261.
19 Ibid., p. 58.
20 Ibid., pp. 48, 58, 60, 63, 66, 75, 77, 142, 152, 165.
21 Ibid., p. 205.
22 Ibid., pp. 80, 120, 127.
23 Ibid., p. 83.

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24 Ibid., p. 74.
25 Ibid., pp. 88–96.
26 R. Blythe, *The Assassin* (Norwich, 2004).
27 Blythe, *Treasonable Growth*, pp. 12, 13, 15, 19, 77, 97, 113, 194, 264.
28 Ibid., p. 203.
29 R. Blythe, Preface, *Akenfield* (1969, London, 2005), p. 8; and personal correspondence with K. D. M. Snell.
30 R. Blythe, *Akenfield* (1969, Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 19. Subsequent reference will be to this earlier edition.
31 P. Thompson, *The Edwardians: the Remaking of British Society* (London, 1975); H. Newby, *The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farm Workers in East* Anglia (Harmondsworth, 1975); R. Samuel, *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (London, 1981).
32 M. W. Williams, *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (London, 1956). The genre of community studies is well discussed in R. Frankenberg, *Communities in Britain: Social Life in Town and Country* (1966, Harmondsworth, 1970); G. Crow, 'Community studies: fifty years of theorization', *Sociological Research Online*, 7:3 (2002); N. Charles and C. A. Davies, 'Studying the particular, illuminating the general: community studies and community in Wales', *Sociological Review*, 53:4 (2005); G. Crow, *What are Community Studies?* (London, 2018).
33 Blythe, *Borderland*, p. 238. This is a frequent issue raised in *Akenfield*.
34 Blythe, *Time by the Sea*, p. 196.
35 For example, W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (London, 1908); G. E. Fussell, *The English Rural Labourer* (London, 1949).
36 For more recent appraisal of interwar rural issues, see P. Brassley, J. Burchardt and L. Thompson, eds, *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?* (Woodbridge, 2006).
37 This verdict is repeated by at least three of Blythe's interviewees, and it features in some of his other writing too. Blythe, *Akenfield*, pp. 41, 76, 110.
38 Blythe, *Time by the Sea*, p. 237.
39 Blythe, *Borderland*, p. 197. Compare Blythe, *Akenfield*, p. 316, for the same point.
40 On tied cottages, see also M. F. Tilley, *Housing the Country Worker* (London, 1947), pp. 19, 57–9.
41 Blythe, *Akenfield*, p. 187. Interview with Hugh Hambling.
42 Ibid., pp. 179–84.
43 Blythe, 'Akenfield Recollected', in his *Field Work*, p. 151.
44 Blythe, *Akenfield*, pp. 164–74.
45 Ibid., pp. 216–18.
46 R. Samuel, 'Perils of the transcript', *Oral History*, 1:2 (1972), 19–22.
47 Indeed, they collaborated in Tony Parker's biography of Studs Terkel, in effect playing oral historical methods off with each other. See T. Parker, *Studs Terkel: A Life in Words* (London, 1997).
48 E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou* (1975, London, 1978); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965).
49 C. Taylor, *Return to Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village in the 21st Century* (London, 2006).
50 R. Blythe, *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age* (1979, Norwich, 2005), pp. 40, 44, and see the discussion of other writers on pp. 97–116.
51 For example, ibid., pp. 88–9.
52 Ibid., pp. 50–1.
53 Ibid., pp. 24, 116, 118, 123, 135.
54 Ibid., p. 132.
55 Blythe, *Divine Landscapes*, p. 9.
56 Ibid., p. 10.
57 Ibid., pp. 55–8.
58 R. Blythe, *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties, 1919–40* (1963, Harmondsworth, 1964).
59 R. Graves, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918–1939* (London, 1940); J. Harris, *The Big Slump* (London, 1967); J. Stevenson, *British Society, 1914–45* (Harmondsworth, 1990); R. Hattersley, *Borrowed Time: The Story of Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2007); M. Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2008); J. Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London, 2010).
60 Blythe, *Age of Illusion*, p. 130.
61 R. Blythe, *The Circling Year: Perspectives from a Country Parish* (Norwich, 2001), pp. ix–x.
62 R. Mabey, *Gilbert White: A Biography of the Author of The Natural History of Selborne* (London, 1986).
63 H. Rider Haggard, *A Farmer's Year, Being his Commonplace Book for 1898* (1899, London, 1987).
64 Ibid., p. vii.
65 H. Williamson, *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (London, 1941).
66 A. G. Street, *Country Calendar* (London, 1935).
67 H. J. Massingham, *An Englishman's Year* (London, 1948).

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68 R. Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* (London, 2008).
69 M. Cocker, *Claxton: Field Notes from a Small Planet* (London, 2015); M. Cocker, *A Claxton Diary: Further Field Notes from a Small Planet* (London, 2019). Indeed, in the latter book Cocker discusses Henry Williamson at Stiffkey on pp. 82–5.
70 W. Plomer, ed., *Kilvert's Diary, 1870–1879: Selections from the Diary of the Rev. Francis Kilvert* (1938–40, Harmondsworth, 1986).
71 R. Blythe, *Word from Wormingford: A Parish Year* (1997, London, 1998), pp. 78–9, 92, 108. On George Mackay Brown, see also R. Blythe, *Going to Meet George and Other Outings* (Ebrington, 1999).
72 J. Galt, *Annals of the Parish, or the Chronicle of Dalmailing* (1821, Oxford, 1986).
73 Blythe, *Word from Wormingford*, p. 135. See also J. Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972); J. Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (London, 2003).
74 Blythe, *Word from Wormingford*, p. 114.
75 Compare Massingham, *An Englishman's Year*, for example pp. 55, 146: 'This impingement of the divine upon the earthly is a kind of incarnation, Spenser's "heavenly beauty" manifested.'
76 Blythe, *Talking to the Neighbours*, p. 203.
77 Blythe, *Borderland*, p. 241.
78 Ibid., pp. 83–4. There are chapters on some of these artists in Blythe, *Field Work*, pp. 155–202.
79 See also Richard Mabey's assessment in his foreword to R. Blythe, *Aftermath: Selected Writings, 1960–2010* (Norwich, 2010); developed further in R. Mabey, *Turning the Boat for Home: A Life Writing about Nature* (London, 2019).
80 Blythe, *Talking to the Neighbours*, pp. 72–6.
81 Ibid., p. 123.
82 Blythe, *Akenfield*, p. 135.
83 Blythe, *Circling Year*, p. 123.
84 See, for example, L. Jones, *Cwmardy* (1937, Cardigan, 2006); L. Jones, *We Live* (1939, London, 1978); and W. Brierley, *Means-Test Man* (London, 1935). On the local and regional traditions of fiction, see K. D. M. Snell, ed., *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1990* (Cambridge, 1998), and K. D. M. Snell, *The Bibliography of Regional Fiction in Britain and Ireland, 1800–2000* (Aldershot, 2002), the latter including the regional fiction of East Anglian counties.
85 Blythe, *Time by the Sea*, p. 151.
86 A. G. Street, *Country Calendar* (1935, London, 1940), p. xii.
87 Blythe, *Time by the Sea*, p. xiii.
88 Ibid., p. 150.
89 C. Grogan, ed., *Imogen Holst: A Life in Music* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 126, 339, 344, 351. Blythe dedicated his *Field Work* to her memory.
90 Blythe, *Time by the Sea*, p. 38.
91 A. Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* (2003, London, 2004), pp. 251, 254–6, 261.
92 My ex-colleague the late Christopher Storm-Clark (Department of Economics, University of York) told me that he spent days burning trunk loads of the papers and diaries of his famous literary grandmother Margaret Storm Jameson (1891–1986), documenting relationships and affairs with some of the leading writers of the twentieth century, because he had promised her that he would do so.
93 Blythe, *Time by the Sea*, p. 208.
94 Ibid., p. 165.
95 Ibid., p. 31.
96 Ibid., p. 235.
97 Ibid., p. 66.
98 Blythe, *Talking to the Neighbours*, p. 150.

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