

Ron Hansford : Countryman Poet

An appreciation

by

Sebastian Hayes

THE VILLAGE CRAFTSMAN or small farmer has left few poetic records. There is nothing mysterious about this. Life for such people was a virtually unending round of practical tasks : even after the ‘day’s work was done’ there were still the chicken coops to shut up, doors and gates to be barred, logs to be brought in for the fire and so on. Those who knew what this life was like, even if they were not illiterate (which most of them were prior to the Victorian era), did not have the time to write about it, and those who did have the time did not know what this life was really like. What records and poetic narratives we do have come from men who grew up within this world but escaped from it to a more leisured — but not necessarily more contented — style of life. George Crabbe, author of the ambitious poem, *The Village*, started off as an apothecary’s assistant but ended up as a country vicar — the position that Hardy’s Jude the Obscure helplessly aspired to. Robert Burns, not surprisingly, wasn’t much of a success as a farmer and for most of his adult life held down a desk job as an Excise Official (tax collector). William Barnes, the Dorset Burns, ran a crammers’ school for aspiring civil servants. Clare, probably the only English poet to have been called out for a confab with his literary agent while working with a sickle in the fields, gravitated to the asylum which, I suppose, at least fed him and kept him warm for more than twenty years.

There was also what one might call the ‘male supremacist agenda’ — “the feeling that poetry was a ‘cissy’ activity”, as Sylvia Oldroyd (Ron Hansford’s wife) writes pertinently. This prejudice is not to be despised : the male breadwinner needed to keep his nose to the grindstone and his hand to the plough, otherwise penury and disaster might well follow. An interest in poetry and suchlike matters has, in a working-class milieu, always been regarded as rather weird, certainly a taste not to be indulged too frequently, like a fatal attraction to gin or loose women. I can remember my grandmother’s scorn when she found me looking at a book on ballet — “Ballet! You won’t earn no money being innarested in ballet!” *Shades of Billy Elliott*.

I say all this to give the background and context to Ron Hansford’s book of poems *Flying into the Blizzard*. For Ron Hansford still lives in the house in which he was born and brought up by his grandparents. Moreover, the house was itself built by his grandfather and was situated in the, at the time, isolated New Forest hamlet of Hardley. Ron Hansford moved out of the rural niche by qualifying to be a librarian. But this was a relatively acceptable promotion which, as opposed to going to university (my own case), did not involve an absolutely irremediable loss of local status. In any case, instead of practising, Ron Hansford returned to the family building business for ten years. Subsequently, he did work as a librarian but carried on keeping chickens, rabbits, pheasants and other livestock — which I don’t expect many librarians do these days. He didn’t need to get involved in any Sixties style ‘back to the land’ movement because he had never left it.

At first sight Ron Hansford looks more of a craftsman and chicken breeder than a librarian. There are no literary references in his poems, and few literary tricks and stratagems.

“your cupped hands harbour
a self-made universe”

I would have been irresistibly tempted to write 'microcosm' instead of 'self-made universe', but the latter is more accurate in the context of the poem, while it still suggests the idea of 'world within world'. So it scores on both counts.

The deliberately spare, even prosaic language is deceptive. The succinctness and flint-like hardness of these poems, typically at most twelve lines long, is clearly the result of long and careful work : the lack of poetic ornament and artifice is the result of policy, not lack of time or ability. An actual lifelong carpenter or bricklayer would have been much more verbose, and would most likely, if he had written poetry at all, not wanted to celebrate his daytime activities at the bench. William Morris preferred to spend his evenings writing poems and stories about a far-off medieval world which never really existed.

Maybe Ron Hansford, because he has, so to speak, partly stepped out of the old rural life-style is, for this reason, able to appreciate what it had to offer and to celebrate it, but he has remained near enough to it not to feel the need to romanticise it. And one suspects that the intense concern with tradition, family roots and craftsmanship, so typical of Ron Hansford's poetry, is there precisely because all these things are fast disappearing, and the poet knows it. This is the moment, he seems to be saying, to chronicle these activities and attitudes before a global movement of urbanization and mass production sweeps them away for ever.

The first thing that struck me about these poems is that they describe and celebrate 'work'. The chief poetic themes in our poetry from the Elizabethan era onwards have been love and death. We very occasionally sense the shadows of these 'eternities' in Ron Hansford's poems, but the foreground is stoutly occupied by much more mundane concerns, how to handle a carpenter's brace (*Breast-drill*), how to mix up cement properly (*Mortar*), or ponderings about the origin of a local place-name (*Place-Name*). This sort of thing is extremely rare in Western literature : even writers sympathetic to the labouring classes were interested only in their 'condition' (where and how they ate, slept and raised children), rarely in what these people did during upwards of ten hours of the day. As a French small farmer once said to me, "You'd imagine that manual work never existed before the time of Zola" (late nineteenth century).

Ron Hansford bleeds out most of the 'poetry' of the countryside and workshop. It is *what is going on* (or went on) that matters, not who does what and where. The manual activities, if not quite 'timeless' in the literal sense — because hand tools and working processes change as the poet realizes — are not specific to a particular person. Tools — wheelbarrows, carpenter's rules, planes, trowels — are more prominent in Ron Hansford's poems than the people who wield them. The breast-drill is doubtless a fairly recent (eighteenth century?) invention, but since it was invented, the user has been obliged to handle it in exactly the same way, i.e. keep it rigidly horizontal, push against it with his chest, avoid touching the bit as he pulls it out of the wood (so as not to burn his fingers), and so on. The tool is greater than the man since it controls the man's behaviour, and is even longer-lived (gets passed on from father to son).

The unspoken message is that human beings are not so important as they think they are (although they do count for something because they leave their mark on the landscape). The Vikings (an entire people!) only rate a passing reference because they happened to land in their long boats near where Ron was born and gave their name to the small local port. And the greatest war in history (WWII) only flickers momentarily across the poet's consciousness because of the peculiar concrete relics, the 'dragon's teeth', that he comes across on the coastline near his place of birth.

Since Byron and the Romantics, poetry has concentrated on the individual to the total exclusion of the local community — for the very good reason that most poets did not belong to any such grouping, and did not want to. Typically, we have lyrics expressing one particular individual's sense of loneliness or amorous unease, or again depictions of vast anonymous processes like World War I in which the individual gets swallowed up. Even nineteenth century 'family' novels only deal with family in the narrow context of the scramble to make a good marriage : Jane Austen's heroines have parents but no ancestors to speak of. It is thus surprising, and touching, to find in Ron Hansford's poems a deep concern with family in a genuinely historical sense. The poet is not marooned in a specific contemporary situation, he reaches back into a nameless line of ancestors and the contact is maintained by the enduring work-place with its inherited objects:

“Breast-plate judders against the chest
a flanged shank is boring through my ribs;
this poignancy of dead men's tools”.

These days, family usually means a very narrow range of persons who are more often than not dispersed all over the globe and only get together for weddings and funerals, if that. But in a hamlet, everyone is more or less related to everyone else, and even second or third cousins are family. In such an environment, “No man is an island” is literally true — which it was not for Donne. In the poem “*Country Cousin*” there is no sense that the person in question was particularly remarkable or particularly loved — rather the reverse in fact — but the loss is, for all that, deeply felt because of the family bond

“You're lost to me now
with everything you had of mine
the coincidence of shared knowing
I took for granted like a Wessex vowel.
you are taking into the ground with you
too many of my belongings.”

This expansion of the individual in space and time is, in part, comforting but can also be inhibiting. Like the primitive tribesman always conscious of his long dead ancestors looking over his shoulder, the author feels that he is being watched

“Sawing to the line
in a family workshop
ghosts reprove me
when I force the blade.”

This relic of ‘ancestor worship’ explains the odd note of diffidence, even self-reproof, which surfaces from time to time in these poems. For the author cannot entirely rid himself of the feeling that he has ‘stepped out of line’ by becoming educated and abandoning the old style of life. He tries to get round this by viewing the writing of poems as a craft, and language as a living organism. This equation of words to raw material and writing to craftsmanship is much more than a simile, it is closer to the Zen-like idea that certain activities can be paths towards enlightenment.

“Working the old levels, I squat in an open shed
splitting and dressing my soul’s slate
trying to roof the world with a wagon-load of words.”

This brings me to a curious aspect of these poems. They are deliberately pared down, austere, with the expression of personal emotion held strongly in check. But instead of sensing a latent and suppressed sensuality as in, say, certain poems of Tennyson, one senses an undercurrent of intense religiosity which does not quite dare to speak its name. It is not for nothing that Ron Hansford intersperses the personal poems with a celebration of the Celtic *Peregrini*, the

“frail saints
braving cold seaways
driven by God’s breath.”

The use of religious similes, though it is sometimes tongue in cheek, in other places has a deeper though somewhat paradoxical significance. In “*Contract Joinery*”, we could get the impression that the mundane activity of joinery is being ‘ennobled’ by being compared to the way to live a human life : but one might just as well interpret it as meaning that the mundane activity of living is ennobled by being compared to the ageless activity of joining together two pieces of wood. And all this arduous activity is, when all is said and done, no more — but also no less — than

“one way
to spend a lifetime
fabricating our own cross
the sky dark as heartwood.”

In most of Hansford’s poems, as here, there is no specific message or moral as such, almost one might say no inherent *meaning*, but they are not for all that *meaningless*, they echo and resonate in the mind giving rise to a kind of mute understanding. (I have read that this is how Japanese *haiku* are supposed to act, but I have no doubt Hansford developed his own technique quite independently.)

The mood of these poems is thoughtful, elegiac, very occasionally lyrical, never despairing. It is neither pro nor contra life, things are as they are. Even when the poet does not use a single non-factual word and is apparently just noting down what he sees, he still manages to convey this distinctive mood

“Replaced by pier and ferry
the bar persists at each low water
a tongue of shingle naming a village.”

These things have happened, the poet is saying : the coming of sea-raiders to Hythe, the construction of a modern pier, the making of cement nest-boxes in my family workshop, my son's birth, my second cousin's death, the writing of these poems describing these events... Such things, such happenings, are important and yet not important, or not important and yet important, and for precisely the same reasons.

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Notes

A STUDIED reticence in not showing emotion that even goes further than Chinese and Japanese poetry. Strange effect of a poem like *September* (good title)

*Each box has its removable panel
For cleaning-out at the end of the season.*



Very few poems today written about family ties. Since the Romantics, more particularly Byron, poets are typically completely absorbed in their own personal unhappiness, or they write about a vast human-scale tragedy, such as World War I. The family as such, extended or not, rarely gets a look in. So it is touching to see this in Hansford's poems.



Perspective is not a Christian one, since the poet remains strictly concerned with *this* world, not the future life or the Absolute. He just has a longer time scale.



Most of us have done it the other way, got educated first and thus get severed irrevocably from one's roots, then threw it up to 'return to the land' or the craft workshop. I myself ended up gardening and bricklaying. Ron Hansford does it the other way.



Local elderly codger I once met in the outskirts of Dorchester about forty years ago. I asked him if he had known Thomas Hardy. He said, "Yes, miserable bugger 'e was 'n' all. My kids were picking blackberries from his hedge and be darned if 'e didn't set the dog on 'em!" I asked him if he'd read any of his books, and what he thought of them. "A little bit of nonsense," he answered, "usually someone ends up in the family way." Thus was dismissed the man who is possibly England's greatest novelist. The interesting thing was that he talked and looked exactly like a Thomas Hardy character.



In the working classes poetry was regarded as 'women's stuff', like religion. The woman of the household was in the nineteenth century more likely to be literate and have the leisure to read, if only between washing and cleaning. Poetry was Patience Strong, devotional stuff mixed with sentimentality and self-help, not so far from hymns.

At the same time, this male scorn of education was doubtless in many cases a pose, there was also a wistful longing to be 'edicated', at least in modern times. 'Knowledge is power'. Also, inside the grizzled farmer and craftsman there

is lurking, who knows, a tender soul crying to get to the light of day. Folk songs are generally sad, those from the Auvergne utterly tragic, and they speak of love and are not often bawdy. (Some troubadour songs are.)

I was born in a house whose cobbled yard contained a single tap which served five families. Our next door neighbours were the Parrs, the old man a WWI veteran, tall and stiff, who shaved himself with a cut-throat razor on a wooden table set up in the yard — my grandmother thought he was taking up too much space. He was illiterate but his wife was not, she also played the organ. They were Ealom Brethren and the local pastor would drop in and she would play hymns on this little old pedal organ.

There is a grim and even somewhat sinister ‘poetry’ in *Pilgrim’s Progress* which frightened me as a child, as did Charles Kingsley.



Strong line

The sky dark as heartwood.

Page 20, the poem **Newts** might be called *Elegy Written by a Filled-in Pond*.

“newts swim now, only in my aqueous mind”

Phrases which are at once mannered but ring true, such as

The coincidence of shared knowing

Sort of effect Seamus Heaney aspires to — and rarely achieves.



Coleridge and Wordsworth were interested in the rustic characters who moved about the English countryside, but they were not interested in what they did — their work, I mean. But anyone who has lived in the country and plied a trade knows that individuals are not really important, they come and go, they are anonymous agents of change. It is what people do that matters and I suppose love is only really important because it is part of the process of producing children.

Building, joinery, are *active* occupations, the craftsman has of necessity a very different vision to that of the visitor, the nature lover, the botanist. There is interaction with Nature, not pure contemplation.

The workman does not think ‘Know Thyself’, but ‘Know Thy Raw Material’ (wood, stone). Know yourself? Why bother? One man is much like another. Generations come and go but the act of making goes on.



Contemporary tools, manufactured in a foreign land, bought, soon broken, discarded, replaced, generate no feeling of continuity. But the old craftsman has

this sense because, more often than not, he inherits his tools and they have a longer life than he does. This sense of continuity gives rise to the innate conservatism of the country dweller, a sentiment that to townspeople appears perverse, wicked, at any rate inexplicable.



'Unitary Vision' in a very different way to that of Sylvia Oldroyd. Ron Hansford deliberately ignores the 'spiritual' dimension, or as much as he can, since there remains a residue of suppressed religiosity which breaks cover from time to time. Rather than investing humble tasks with an extra dimension which, the poet feels, they do not really need, Hansford does the opposite, insisting on seeing the act of writing, not as anything bardic and semi-sacred, but as a technique, a craft akin to bricklaying.



Views language as a raw material worked on by successive 'workers', namely speakers of it, foreigners importing new devices, new figures of speech, new references to historical events. An organic view.



These poems, so obviously worked, so unspontaneous, do for all that reflect something of the life of the craftsman/countryman since this life is, in the last analysis, 'artificial' — artificial compared to that of the herdsman or hunter/gatherer who drifts through the landscape without leaving a permanent trace. The farmer and craftsman is always changing Nature, is always saying 'Kilroy was here'.



Layers of meaning such as the poem *Contract Joinery* .

Living, the most important activity of all, is being compared to joinery. The idea is not that joinery is being ennobled by the comparison but rather, by a deliberate reversal of sense, that the mundane activity of living is 'ennobled' by being compared to the really important, timeless activity of joinery. At the same time, since we are in a Christian culture, we are made to think of Christ on the cross, of suffering, loneliness and so forth. The workman's humility towards his raw material, wood, is similar to the virtue of self-sacrifice that Christ practised. So the religious image is not fanciful after all, and the historic fact that Christ actually practised joinery himself locks the whole complex of images up very nicely indeed. This is an example of the many-layeredness of Hansford's poems, a subtlety that only comes across after several readings.



Philosophic dimension natural to the country dweller, but not the city dweller, since the countryman is always aware of time, of change on a background of

changelessness, rhythms of death and rebirth. But these are the perennial themes of philosophy...



Sort of diffidence, uncertainty because of the weight of ancestors

*Wrestling now with foot and metre
How am I measuring up?*



Not the feeling that the cousin was especially remarkable, or especially loved, but simply that he was the cousin.

*You are taking into the ground with you
Too many of my belongings*