

# Summer



I've lived in the country for a lot of my life but I've never felt that I belonged . . . It is so strange . . . I have never experienced such an atmosphere . . . as exists here . . . I have to talk about it simply because it is so curious. It is the power which the children have to resist everybody and everything outside of the village . . . The village children . . . are convinced that they have something which none of the newcomers can ever have, some kind of mysterious life which is so perfect that it is a waste of time to search for anything else.

Daphne Ellington, teacher,  
quoted in Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield* (1969)

There is no beginning, and there is no end. The sun rises, and falls, each day, and the seasons come and go. The days, months and years alternate through sunshine, rain, hail, wind, snow and frost. The leaves fall each autumn and burst forth again each spring. The earth spins through the vastness of space. The grass comes and goes with the warmth of the sun. The farms and the flocks endure, bigger than the life of a single person. We are born, live our working lives and die, passing like the oak leaves that blow across our land in the winter. We are each a tiny part of something enduring, something that feels solid, real and true. Our farming way of life has roots deeper than five thousand years into the soil of this landscape.

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I was born in late July 1974, into a world that centred on an old man and his two farms. He was a proud farmer called William Hugh Rebanks, 'Hughie' to his mates, 'Granddad' to me. He had a rough whiskery face when you kissed him goodnight. He smelt of sheep and cattle, and only had one yellow tooth, but he could clean the meat off a lamb chop with it like a jackal.

He had three children. Two daughters, who had married good farmers, and my father. Dad was the youngest, the one who was to carry on his farm. I was his youngest grandson, but the only one with his name. From my

first memories until his dying day, I thought the sun shone out of his backside. Even as a small child, I could see that he was the king of his own world, like a biblical patriarch. He doffed his cap to no man. No one told him what to do. He lived a modest life but was proud and free and independent, with a presence that said he belonged in this place in the world. My first memories are of him, and knowing I wanted to be just like him some day.

We live and work our small hill farm in the far north-west of England, in the Lake District. We farm in a valley called Matteredale, between the first two rounded fells (mountains) that emerge on your left as you travel west on the main road from Penrith. From the summit of the fell behind our house, you can see north across the silver glimmering of the distant Solway estuary to Scotland. There is a stolen moment each early summer when I climb that fell and sit with my sheepdogs and have half an hour to take the world in. To the east you can see the backbone of England, the Pennines, with the good farming land of the Eden Valley opening up below. I smile at the thought that the entire history of our family has played out in the fields and villages stretching away beneath that fell, between Lake District and Pennines, for at least six centuries, and probably longer. We shaped this landscape, and we were shaped by it in turn. My people lived, worked and died down there for countless generations. It is what it is because of them and people like them.

It is, above all, a peopled landscape. Every acre of it has been defined by the actions of men and women over

the past ten thousand years. Even the mountains were riddled with mines and pocked with quarries, and the seemingly wild woodland behind us was once intensively harvested and coppiced. Almost everyone I am related to and care about lives within sight of that fell. When we call it 'our' landscape, we mean it as a physical and intellectual reality. There is nothing chosen about it. This landscape is our home and we rarely stray far from it, or endure anywhere else for long before returning. This may seem like a lack of imagination or adventure, but I don't care. I love this place; for me it is the beginning and the end of everything, and everywhere else feels like nowhere.

From that fell, I look out over a place crafted by largely forgotten working people. It is a unique man-made place, a landscape divided and defined by fields, walls, hedges, dykes, roads, becks, drains, barns, quarries, woods and lanes. I can see our fields and a hundred jobs that I should be doing instead of idling up on the fell. I see sheep climbing a wall into a hay meadow down below, and I know I have to stop messing about, day-dreaming like a bloody poet or day-tripper and get some work done. To the west, I see the high fells of the Lake District, often covered for half the year in snow, and from the highest of those you can see the Irish Sea. To the south, the fells block my view, but somewhere beyond them is the rest of England. The Lake District is relatively small, being only about 800 square miles. So, if you looked down on our land from outer space, you would see we are on the eastern edge of a small cluster

of mountain valleys. Our valley is small, even by the standards of the Lake District, a basin of enclosed land and meadows surrounded by fells, scattered with little farmsteads. I can drive through it from one end to the other in five minutes. I look across to my neighbours on the other side of the valley a mile away and can hear them gathering their sheep on the fell sides. The valley where we live and farm stretches beneath me like an old man's upturned cupped hands.

There is something about this landscape that people love. It would, in summer, seem to most people around the world to be exceptionally green and lush. It is a 'pastoral landscape' and 'temperate', a place of heavy rainfall and warm summers, an excellent place, in short, for growing grass in the summer. As writers have long noted, it is an intimate landscape on a human scale. Whitewashed farmhouses hug the fell sides just beneath the ancient common land of the fells. Other farmsteads dot the valley floor on higher ground, or riggs, that rise from the rushes of the sodden land in the valley bottom, including the one where my grandfather lived. We are one of maybe 300 farming families who sustain this landscape and its ancient way of life.

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My grandfather was born in 1918 into a fairly anonymous and unexceptional farming family. At that time they mostly lived and farmed down in the heart of the Eden Valley. The written records, for what they are

worth, show that my grandfather belonged to an agricultural family struggling by from generation to generation, occasionally making it into the ranks of relatively established farmers, before sinking back into being tenants, or farm-workers, or in the workhouse, or worse. The written story peters out into an illegible sixteenth-century script of births, deaths and marriages, in church records belonging to little villages close to where their descendants still live and work. My grandfather is, quite simply, one of the great forgotten silent majority of people who lived, worked, loved and died without leaving much written trace that they were ever there. He was, and we his descendants remain, essentially nobodies as far as anyone else is concerned. But that's the point. Landscapes like ours were created by, and survive through, the efforts of nobodies. That's why I was so shocked to be given a 'dead, rich, white man' version of its history at school. This is a landscape of modest, hard-working people. The real history of our landscape should be the history of the nobodies.

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The alarm clock vibrates on the bedside table. My hand swipes across and kills it: 4.30 a.m. I was only half-asleep anyway. The room is already half-lit with the coming dawn. I see my wife's shoulder, and her leg curled over the sheet, and my two-year-old son lying between us, where he came in during the night. I move quietly out of the room with a fistful of clothes. The sun will rise soon over the edge of the fell.

In the kitchen I swig at a carton of milk. I throw on my clothes robotically, half-awake. I have half an hour before we are meeting at the fell gate. We are going to gather the fell flock in for clipping (shearing). My mind is on a kind of checklist autopilot.

Right clothes: check.

Breakfast: check.

Sandwiches: check.

Boots: check.

As I get to the barn, my sheepdogs Floss and Tan jump, wriggle and make whining noises until I unchain them. They know we are going to the fell. I feed them so they'll have energy later when they need it. A shepherd on a fell without a good sheepdog, or dogs, is useless. The fell sheep are half-wild, can smell weakness, and would escape and create chaos without good sheepdogs. Men can't get to lots of places the dogs can – to the crags and rocky scree, to chase the ewes down. When I head out, Tan bolts for the barn door and jumps on the quad bike. Floss follows.

Sheepdogs fed and loaded: check.

Quad bike: check.

Fuel: check.

The swallows explode outwards from the barn door, disturbed by the dogs. They fledged a couple of days ago and whole families head out over my head to the fields where they hawk all day over the grass and thistles.

Fingers of pink and orange light are now creeping over the fell sides. Sunrise.

These are the hottest days of summer. As I go along

the road, I feel the heat rising from the tarmac. Sun. Dust. Flies. Blue skies. It is too hot in the heat of the day for moving sheep, something we would scarcely have believed possible for the past eight or nine months of cold wet weather. By midday they will be panting, or hiding in the nooks and crannies for shade, and we will miss lots of them. It is too hot for sheepdogs as well. You can kill dogs working them too hard in the heat and humidity. So we intend to start early and do the work before the sun burns high in the sky.

I didn't know anything about gathering today until last night. I had been in the bath when the phone rang. My wife brought it in and I pretended I wasn't in the bath. It was my neighbour Alan, an older, well-respected farmer who has a lot of sheep on the fell and has done it much longer than me. He's the boss, the elder statesman, if you like, and he organizes the commoners to work together. Organizing fell farmers to do anything collectively is not easy, so I don't envy his job one bit. He doesn't waste words unnecessarily.

'We are gathering the fell tomorrow.'

'OK.'

'Meet at the fell gate at 5 a.m.'

'Right.'

Then he hangs up to call someone else.

I knew it was impending because of the date, and because it is time to clip the ewes, but it is a communal job that needs the right weather, and men to be free

of other work to do it. So it's a bit like waiting for D-Day – you never know until the phone call, or shout from the road as he passes, to say 'It's on tomorrow'.

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Gathering is ancient communal work that consists of everyone with rights to graze sheep on the unfenced common land working together with their sheepdogs to bring in the flocks from the fells. There are about ten different flocks of sheep on our fell, a vast unenclosed piece of moorland and mountain. Because there are no large predators, the sheep are left to graze alone, but are brought down several times a year for lambing, clipping and other key activities in the life of the flock. Beyond our common lie other unfenced areas of mountain land, other fells, farmed by other commoners, so in theory our sheep could wander right across the Lake District. But they don't because they know their place on the mountains. They are 'hefted' – taught their sense of belonging by their mothers as lambs – an unbroken chain of learning that goes back thousands of years. So the sheep can never be sold from the fell without breaking that ancient link. This is, they say, the greatest concentration of common land in Western Europe; and on it survives a kind of farming that is older than that which exists across much of the world today.

The fell land we are gathering today doesn't belong to us, it belongs to the National Trust. Other fells belong to other landowners, but we have an ancient legal right