

Contemporary British Georgic Writing

Terry Gifford

Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

Universidad de Alicante, Spain

t.gifford2@bathspa.ac.uk

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Abstract

Do we need the modish term “eco-georgic” to help us discover the unsentimental, holistic, healing qualities in the best georgic writing of the Anthropocene? When were georgics not “eco”? Is there a “post-georgic” in forms of contemporary literature that seem to reject husbandry altogether, such as rewilding texts? Do such categories serve any purpose to readers and critics in the Anthropocene? This essay argues that such careful distinctions do, indeed, matter more than ever now as we reconsider our sustainable options in husbandry, land-management and what sustainability might look like, as it is represented and explored in our fiction and non-fiction georgic literature in Britain at the present. One might expect contemporary georgic writing to exemplify the environmental engagement implied in the term “eco-georgic”. In fact, contemporary georgic can be environmentally radical or apparently indirect in its implications for sustainability. It remains as diverse, hybrid and composted in the past as Virgil’s original text. This essay begins by considering definitions, with reference to Virgil’s founding Latin text, begun in the third decade BCE, the *Georgics*. It recognises Laura Sayre’s complaint that ecocriticism has neglected georgic writing, and argues that this is certainly true for contemporary British georgic texts. This essay focuses on contemporary georgic fiction and non-fiction in relation to Virgil’s founding text. The novels of Cynan Jones, Tom Bullough, Marie-Elsa Bragg and Tim Pears are discussed and contrasted with one by Melissa Harrison that might mistakenly be thought of as georgic. Three categories of non-fiction are identified and discussed with examples: instructional georgic, personal memoir and future-oriented georgic. Consideration of the latter leads to conclusions about their inevitable overlaps and a final call for a radical mutual agency to embed animism and enchantment into contemporary georgic writing.

Keywords: Virgil, eco-georgic, instructional georgic, personal memoir, future-oriented georgic.

Resumen

¿Necesitamos el término de moda “eco-geórgico” para ayudarnos a descubrir las cualidades no sentimentales, holísticas y curativas en la mejor escritura geórgica del Antropoceno? ¿Cuándo no eran “eco” las geórgicas? ¿Hay un “post-geórgico” en las formas de literatura contemporánea que parecen rechazar por completo la agricultura, como los textos de retorno a la vida silvestre? ¿Sirven tales categorías para los lectores y críticos en el Antropoceno? Este ensayo argumenta que tales distinciones cuidadosas, de hecho, importan más que nunca ahora que reconsideramos nuestras opciones sostenibles en la agricultura, la gestión de la tierra y cómo podría ser la sostenibilidad, tal y como está representada y desarrollada en la literatura de ficción y no ficción en Gran Bretaña en la actualidad. Uno podría esperar que la escritura geórgica contemporánea ejemplifique el compromiso ambiental implícito en el término “eco-geórgico”. De hecho, la geórgica contemporánea puede ser ambientalmente radical o aparentemente indirecta en sus implicaciones para la sostenibilidad. Sigue siendo tan diverso, híbrido y compostado en el pasado como lo es el texto original de Virgilio. Este ensayo comienza considerando las definiciones, con referencia al texto fundacional en latín de Virgilio, comenzado en la tercera década a. C., las *Geórgicas*. Reconoce la queja de Laura Sayre de que la ecocrítica ha descuidado la escritura geórgica, y argumenta que esto es indisputablemente cierto para los textos geórgicos británicos contemporáneos. Este ensayo se centra en la ficción contemporánea y la no ficción en relación con el texto fundacional de Virgilio. Las novelas de Cynan Jones, Tom Bullough, Marie-Elsa Bragg y Tim Pears se analizan y contrastan con una de Melissa Harrison que erróneamente podría considerarse como geórgica. Tres categorías de no ficción se identifican y son

analizadas con ejemplos: geórgico instructivo, memorias personales y geórgico orientado al futuro. La consideración de estos últimos lleva a conclusiones sobre sus inevitables superposiciones y a un llamamiento final a una agencia mutua radical para integrar el animismo y el encantamiento en la escritura contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Virgilio, eco-geórgico, geórgico instructivo, memorias personales, geórgico orientado al futuro.

Definitions

One of Seamus Heaney's late essays was titled "Eclogues 'In Extremis': On the Staying Power of Pastoral" (2003). The Northern Irish poet saw himself as continuing a tradition of pastoral that began in the fourth decade BCE with Virgil's *Eclogues*, and a growing body of Irish literary scholarship confirms that Heaney's poetic innovations form a part of that tradition (Burris, *Pastoral Tradition*; Fawley 138-148; O'Donoghue 111-119; Potts 45-74). But Heaney might just as well have written an essay with the title "On the Staying Power of Georgics", a different Virgilian tradition begun in the third decade BCE with the *Georgics*, with which he was also well acquainted, and to which he could lay equal claim as a contributor. The teaching of Latin in schools persisted longer in Ireland than in the grammar schools of England, and Virgil's *Georgics* has always been a text popular with teachers, partly because of both its detailed familiarity with agricultural practices, and its engagement with the unpredictability of the natural environment. In the *Georgics* hard work is a virtue, but so is an alertness to nature and an adaptability in working with it sustainably. Michael Longley, Bernard O'Donoghue and Peter Fallon have outlived Heaney as the last generation of Irish poets to have been schooled in Latin. When Heaney's friend and sometime publisher at The Gallery Press, Peter Fallon, made a new translation of the *Georgics* (2004), Heaney immediately made a point of endorsing Fallon's authenticity as "a poet who has not only lived on a farm but has done the work of a farmer" ("Glory of the world"). In georgic literature, authenticity matters, and the potential consequence of inaccuracy or inattention is that farmers and their consumers go hungry. "It is this combination of truth to the words Virgil wrote, natural vernacular speech and a general at-homeness on the land that make Fallon's an inspired translation," Heaney wrote in his review for *The Irish Times* ("Glory of the World"). For Heaney, the challenge that Virgil set himself to explore poetically, that of working in harmony with the land, was significant because it constituted a necessary way of recovering from the discord of civil war in Virgil's Italy. The parallel for Heaney with the discord in the North of Ireland hardly needs pointing out. The conclusion of Heaney's review suggests that the qualities of Virgil's *Georgics* he enumerates resound with contemporary relevance:

Unsentimental, holistic, as careful of the gods in the heavens as of the Italian ground, it was Virgil's dream of how his hurt country might start to heal. After two millennia of technical improvements in agriculture and no improvements whatever in the war-mongering activities of the species, it doesn't sound old. ("Glory of the world")

Heaney's recognition of the continuing relevance of the *Georgics* here is double-edged. Our war against each other and the soil ("technical improvements" we now know to have warred against ecology) continues. We thus need, more than ever, Virgil's "dream" of healing, although it might be only a dream. So, if this is true, does the modish term "eco-georgic" help us rediscover those "unsentimental", "holistic", "healing qualities" as we read georgic writing in the Anthropocene? When were georgics not "eco"? Are there "uneco-georgics"? Indeed, is there a "post-georgic" in some forms of contemporary literature about husbandry, such as rewilding texts? Has an uneasy distinction between georgic and pastoral collapsed in contemporary rural writing? Has the recognition of the "post-pastoral" rendered "eco-georgic" redundant? Do such categories serve any purpose to readers and critics in the Anthropocene? My argument in this essay is that such careful distinctions do, indeed, matter as we reconsider the sustainability of our options in husbandry and land-management, as that husbandry is represented and explored in our poetry, fiction and non-fiction literature. One might expect contemporary georgic writing to exemplify the environmental engagement implied in the term "eco-georgic". In fact, contemporary georgic can be environmentally radical or apparently indirect in its implications for sustainability. It remains as diverse, hybrid and caught between past traditions and present dilemmas as Virgil's original text.

David Fairer introduced the term "eco-georgic" in order to make a case for the kind of eighteenth century georgic that British ecocritics had conspicuously ignored in favour of the Romantic pastoral discussed in Jonathan Bate's pioneering book *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991). Inadvertently inviting the same criticism of his own new term, Fairer wrote: "'Green Romanticism' seems almost tautological" ("Where fuming trees" 203). In the course of his argument Fairer establishes a useful distinction between pastoral myth and georgic authenticity: "The spiritual dynamic of Romantic ecocriticism, founded on pastoral ideals, remains inspirational; but georgic's grappling with the possible death of Nature and the breakdown of its infinitely various life-sustaining systems, has something to contribute too" ("Where fuming trees" 214). Elsewhere Fairer has expressed that distinction in more stark terms:

In being a stereotype, pastoral could be inverted, turned round, parodied and played with; but in order for all this to work it had to remain a stereotype. Georgic, on the other hand, was at home with notions of growth, development, variety, digression, and mixture, and had a natural tendency to absorb the old into the new, and find fresh directions. Pastoral's limitations and georgic's capaciousness, were, in other words, equally fruitful; but they marked out different kinds of poetry. (*English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century* 80)

One could argue with the reductiveness of "stereotype" here and with pastoral conventions as "limitations," but the combination of direct, practical "grappling" with nature's unpredictability and the capacity for language and forms to represent adaption with "capaciousness" offers a definition of georgic to take forward into a reading of contemporary literature concerned with husbandry. There is more to be said about georgic's relationship with pastoral (see Gifford *Pastoral* and Gifford 2022 forthcoming), but for present purposes the central feature of georgic is its practical dialogue with the organic – "where nature is drawn into culture and culture leaks into nature" as Paul Evans put it recently ("Country Diary").

In reading contemporary georgic it will be important to recognise the genre's own literary "variety, digression and mixture" and its "capaciousness" in creating hybridity that were a feature of Virgil's foundational text. This is evident in the different historical approaches to the *Georgics* as a didactic genre, for example, or as an allegorical one, or as one concerned with labour of any kind, or with any kind of rural activity, such as "piscatorial georgic." Virgil's Book Four begins with didactics about the siting of bee hives before idealising their landscape setting. This develops into a political allegory about how to deal with rival leaders, which later becomes explicit commentary on the "commonwealth" of bees, and ends with a formal short epic, an *aition*, explaining the origin of the custom for dealing with loss, through the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Juan Christian Pellicer has noted six examples of "errors" in the *Georgics*, one of which, advocating the spontaneous creation of bees from the carcass of a young bullock, illustrates the importance of making distinctions ("Georgic as Genre"). As a didactic passage it is clearly in error, but as an allegory of sweetness emerging from death it is still present on Tate and Lyle syrup bottles (now Abram Lyle and Sons) which carry the dead lion and bees icon, with the endorsement of a Biblical text. This image of life emerging from death is an ancient symbol recognised by Simon Armitage, in *Still* (2016), who used it as his final passage of translations from the *Georgics* in response to photographs of the Somme Battlefield.

Armitage prefers to call his versions of the *Georgics* "manipulations" ("Reading"), but his work follows the five major new translations which Laura Sayre lists as having been published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Whilst recognising a renewed publishing interest in the *Georgics*, Sayre complains that ecocriticism has neglected georgic writing, and this is certainly true for contemporary georgic texts. "The fact that the *Georgics* and the georgic continue to be so frequently overlooked suggests the stubborn narrowness of our understanding of the human-environment dilemma," Sayre writes in her essay, "Ecocritical Lessons from the History of Virgil's *Georgics* in Translation" (in Christopher Schliephake's *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity* 194). Such narrowness might be exemplified by the attention given to British New Nature Writing, attention that often fails to recognise the extent to which it also focuses on the georgic. This observation echoes Mark Cocker's argument, in *Our Place: Can We Save Britain's Wildlife Before It Is Too Late?* (2018), that whilst Britain has seen a rise in interest in wildlife organisations and nature reserves, it has allowed industrial agriculture to denature the countryside upon which wildlife depends. Never before have bees and other pollinators, for example, been under such threat, and their appearance in our literature more significant (Rigby 110). Suddenly, Virgil's *Georgics* seem more relevant than ever; at least one of the contemporary writers under consideration in this essay actually consults Virgil's *Georgics* for advice.

Fiction

"So the story goes [...]". With this phrase, towards the end of Book Four, Virgil begins a mythic narrative which, in turn, contains another mythic narrative as the story

of Aristaeus leads into the Orpheus story. In Book Four what begins as advice on bee-keeping turns into an allegory for social choices as the community of bees comes to represent human social and political dramas. But contemporary fictional narratives have rarely been read through the frame of their georgic challenges, that is the choices and dilemmas of farming, as creating and reflecting the human dramas associated with this way of life. David Fairer's term was intended to make a claim for eighteenth century georgic, but would the reading of contemporary fiction be enhanced, extended and enriched by the term "eco-georgic"? Five contemporary novels stand out as conspicuously georgic in their detailed concern with what Laura Sayre calls "the human-environment dilemma" (194) of how to relate to land and animals. Two are set in Wales, one tracing a single day, and the other seventy years of human engagement with land, animals, and occasionally bees. Close attention to these texts might demonstrate how a good georgic novel integrates, inseparably, tensions of concern for land, animals and humans.

Cynan Jones' *The Long Dry* (2006) charts a day during which a pregnant cow wanders off and has to be found, an event that raises, in the farming family, memories and anxieties which are neglected but unavoidable. The prose immediately establishes a knowing and poetic quality, despite its simplicity, in describing the family's first moving into the farmhouse: "When the house started to live around its new people, things seemed to find a more comfortable place for themselves – like earth settling – haphazard and somehow right, like the mixture of things in a hedge" (4). The farmer, Gareth, as he searches his fields for the cow, muses on his wife's anxiety about ageing, her feeling that her body is no longer attractive to him, and the aftereffects of her miscarriages. "When, years later, they found that Gareth had chlamydia and this was why she lost the babies – it had transferred in fluids from handling the sheep – Gareth was relieved. It fell on him [...] After losing the babies, she felt every death" (49). Which is why, before he sets out on his search, Gareth disposes of a stillborn calf down an old well. The author thus demonstrates his georgic authenticity on the third page, dead farm animals having been traditionally disposed of cheaply and conveniently by hiding them in old wells, old shafts, or limestone "slockers" (swallets) in the Mendips Hills of England. Cumbrian sheep farmer and author James Rebanks calls such a place the farm's "dead hole" (194).

The farming rhythms of lows and highs, of death and beauty, of depression and insight, continue through the novel as the cow wanders aimlessly into a bog and the vet arrives to put down the old dog, Curly, whilst the mother sleeps off a headache and only the little girl is in the yard to watch the vet. Gareth "believed in dignity though, that this was a right in life not just human. He knew that having Curly put down was about dignity" (87). Gareth hears his son driving the Transit back to the farm after reluctantly doing a job. "Looking out over the sea he thinks of his son; he does not want to farm, but he'll know one day what a wonderful place this is" (43). The vet, after he arrived, was thinking, with wonder, about the remarkable life of a bee searching purposefully around a corner of the yard. There is a passage in this novel about beetles eating fly maggots in a dead mole the cat has brought in. These passages contribute to the sense of the rhythms of what the mother in her sleep calls "the farm turning," which eases her pain (88). But what lends Gareth dignity is his belief in caring: "He thinks, if we have tragedy then we have to face

care” (78). Indeed, he goes on to think about his farming family, “That perhaps a crisis would cure them too – would push away the tiny problems that were damaging them like splinters” (78). The problem is that attempts to express that love and care by both himself and his wife get misunderstood and end in another row. However, the cow is found and brought back by a neighbour to whom Gareth has generously lent some land, and as Gareth is burying the dog, it finally begins to rain.

The complex overlapping matrix of concerns and caring in farming family life is explored with great subtlety in spite of the book’s spare prose, or perhaps most poignantly because of its spare prose. Published ten years later, the more loquacious prose of Tom Bullough’s *Addlands* (2016) achieves an equally moving account of a farming family’s various responses and adjustments to new technologies that overtake the traditions which have come to be associated with important values. At the centre of this Welsh farming family is the mother, Etty, who negotiates these tensions with an eye to the long-term survival of the farm. Bullough savours the vernacular formulations of English spoken by the Welsh and further inflected by their farming vocabulary. (This linguistic humour extends to Bullough’s mentioning a poetry collection, *The Drought*, which some unnamed critic has pompously described as “one of the formative books in post-pastoral poetry” (248). It seems likely that Bullough is referencing the original definition of “post-pastoral” in Gifford, *Pastoral*, 167-200.) The chapters of *Addlands* are titled by dates, beginning in 1941, with Idris reluctantly horse-ploughing meadowland for the war effort and for wartime payments, his defiance expressed by doing it well, unlike his neighbours’ more desultory compliance. In 2001, with the farm near bankruptcy, Etty decides to infect the farm’s own flock with foot-and-mouth in order to get compensation payments. By 2011, with the land sold, Etty is pleased that her grandson, after he has travelled the world post-university as a computer programmer, has returned to live in the run-down cottage that he now owns, the place that was occasionally lived in for “his grandfather’s weekends” (283), where the farming family could never have afforded to have electricity installed. “It brought Etty a warm, enveloping pleasure to think that, after everywhere he had been, Cefin should choose to come and live here” (283). Bullough’s novel suggests that it takes generations of hard work to build deep family ties to place. But the irony is that the grandson will not be farming in this place where he grew up, but living from the internet.

This hard work is detailed in Marie-Elsa Bragg’s novel *Towards Mellbreak* (2017) in which a Cumbrian sheep farmer is reluctant to accept that the very work on the land he loves is ultimately responsible for breaking him. Again, change produces its uncomfortable challenges, one of which concerns chemical pesticides having a tragic effect on sheep farmers. In this novel the church plays a role in the rhythms of the year and in connecting with the wider world through missionary work, which is no surprise since the author, who is the daughter of the Cumbrian novelist and broadcaster, Melvin Bragg, is a Duty Chaplain at Westminster Abbey. By contrast, Jim Crace’s novel *Harvest* (2013) has a distinctly pagan atmosphere and an allegorical quality. It is about the historical period when enclosure brought in the sheep and dispossessed the peasant population. But Crace wants this novel to be read as engaging with contemporary concerns rather than as a historical novel, “Which is the problem when you write books

that are, in your mind anyway, metaphors” (“Interview”). However, Crace’s georgic specificity and knowledge of the land itself constructs this novel less as political metaphor than as agricultural allegory, bringing to mind, for example, the selling off of allotments for housing developments, or the post-war decimation of neighbourly small mixed farms for the large-scale industrial monocultures of the twenty-first century. Rob Nixon, reviewing the novel for *The New York Times*, read the novel as an instance of his notion of “slow violence”: “the new enclosures brought about by merciless globalization and the widening chasm between the mega-wealthy and the dispossessed” (8 February 2013). Of course, this does describe what has happened to farming in Britain, as elsewhere in the world, and only serves to demonstrate the reach that can be achieved by a contemporary georgic allegorical novel such as *Harvest*.

The first of the two novels discussed so far—*The Long Dry* and *Addlands*—carry dust-jacket endorsements from Tim Pears, which suggests something of his own reputation as a writer of contemporary rural fiction. Pears grew up on the edge of Dartmoor and first worked as a farm labourer before writing eight rural novels, and then beginning the first of what have since been promoted as “The West Country Trilogy”: *The Horseman* (2017), *The Wanderers* (2018) and *The Redeemed* (2019). These are fastidiously georgic novels, detailing working practices and vocabulary and insistently claiming authenticity. The first novel opens in 1911, when the central character, Leo, is aged twelve. His father is a carter, working with horses, and as the novel begins Leo is breaking a colt for his father, watched by Miss Charlotte, known as Lottie, who is the Master’s young daughter. Their shared love of horses brings Leo and Lottie together, but class dominates their relationship as it is traced through the trilogy up until 1929. From the opening page the period details and the use of language earnestly make their mark on the reader, as here, where the smith fixes a metal tyre on a new wheel for a waggon. “The stocks” of the waggon, we are told, “had been shaped from oak logs and rested in the seasoning chamber five years. The wheels and their parts were carved from oak and stored another three. The dates were nicked in the wood by the wheelwright next-door” (1).

Georgic research, as indicated Pears’ Acknowledgements, was never more transparent, and the emphasis on such detail might be considered overwhelming, even nostalgic, by some readers. But one of the ways Pears avoids sentimentality is to focus on simple descriptions of action rather than feeling. It helps that Leo is taciturn (nor does he smile much). Thus, the narrative is plot-led, with Leo learning to observe the world around him to find his place in it. But actually he is displaced, as the young horseman of the first book turns into the wanderer of the second. Lottie lives a parallel life as the daughter of Lord Prideaux until, in the third book, when Leo has survived the First World War and Lottie is now a vet’s assistant, they return together to a changed rural life. Lottie is the now manager of her father’s estate, and uses a motorcycle to get around it, whilst Leo rents a small plot of land nearby, and works the horses for his landowner until a tractor arrives. They are eventually reconciled through Leo’s patience and persistence in curing Lottie’s horse of its violent fear of the dark. Then, together they use contact with horses as therapy for disturbed people of all ages. In the Epilogue an elderly Leo is turning

a bowl of wood for their granddaughter. This reads like an instruction manual for wood turning, including the qualities of different kinds of wood, and in the trilogy's final pages we are treated to an example of what can only be called georgic fastidiousness: "Leo folded over a sheet of one-hundred-and-eighty-grit sandpaper and smoothed the bowl further, then did so again with a two-hundred-and-forty-grit paper, finely abrading the wood still more" (376). Only in the final paragraph of the trilogy is Pears tempted into explicit georgic metaphor, as Leo's use of the turning lathe rather clumsily becomes the turning of horses in the dust as a metaphor for human life: "hooves prancing, bodies steaming in the morning light, their muscled flanks rippling, revelling in their freedom" (377).

Some of the potential limitations of georgic fiction are revealed by a comparison of Tim Pears' trilogy with a non-georgic rural novel set in East Anglia in the period following the end of Pears' final book. Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018) is narrated by the adolescent Edie Mather, born just after the First World War to a farming family. She is befriended by a visitor to the village from London, Constance FitzAllen. Constance is collecting material for an article on the traditional rural way of life, "country ways: folklore, cottage crafts, dialect words, recipes – that kind of thing" (20), rather than agricultural work practices. Certainly Edie is aware of georgic practices; her discourse on a good barley crop, "it is so exact in its requirements" (41), suggest this, together with her explicit reflection on the need for husbandry in the case of the neighbouring Hullet family's unmown meadow: "Hullets was proof that nature needed husbandry: that if it wasn't put to work, it went to ruin" (22). But Harrison's novel is not about work in the sense that Pears' characters express themselves through their attention to the details of their work. Constance's interests give Harrison's novel a pastoral focus on passing traditions, alive and just remembered in 1933. Despite Constance's rejection of rural nostalgia, saying that "the English are already far too much in love with the past", she wants to paradoxically "remake the country entirely" based upon those traditions in order to "set it back on the right course" (21). Constance's view of georgic activity tends towards a mode of pastoral that pretends to reject nostalgia whilst actually idealising traditional practices. In Harrison's exposure of this the author is clearly taking a different stance. *All Among the Barley* is a post-pastoral novel in that the ultimate revelation that Constance is an activist for a rural fascist group called the Order of English Yeomanry demonstrates one of the dangers of pastoral idealisation of traditional ruralism. This revelation may have come as a shock to readers who have empathised with Edie's interest in her supportive friend, the ironically named Constance.

Such complications in a richly textured rural historical novel offer more to the reader than Pears' rather limited plot-driven trilogy. Harrison's prose is more lyrical, expressive of emotion, and her characters are more self-aware of their relationships. The reader has actually been given accumulating evidence of Constance's political agenda which finally invites reflection on the uses of georgic activity for pastoral-political purposes. Edie's intelligent curiosity, her sincerity and vulnerability, her slight mental instability, draw the reader with lyrical prose into what might have appeared to be a pastoral novel of the 1930s. The novel's ending offers a final sad contradiction to any such assumptions. A fire in the hayricks – which may have been started by her father to pay off

the debts of the farm with insurance money – is remembered by the seventy-year old Edie, who seems to have been institutionalised since that trauma. Georgic fiction such as that of Jones and Bullough can achieve the complexities and ironies of Harrison’s work if it is not overwhelmed by the very detail and narrative context that makes it georgic in the first place. Indeed, Dominic Head argues that immersion in “a sustained focus on farming” would have given readers the impression that Harrison endorsed Constance’s idealisation of farming, compromising her ability to finally achieve “bringing them up short” (“The Farming Community Revisited”). But the evidence of Jones’ and Bullough’s novels demonstrates that georgic detail need not necessarily lead to idealisation and can just as easily be regarded as anti-pastoral in effect. Jennifer Ladino has argued for a more nuanced reading of nostalgia that allows it sometimes to represent continuity with values that deserve defending in the present, suggested by what might be called “progressive nostalgia” (13). Idealised nostalgia is always a danger in georgic writing, as Harrison’s novel points out, but it is rarely present in contemporary georgic non-fiction, partly because it is often anchored in a culture of continuity. What does seem clear is that a discussion of the subtleties of these narratives and their positioning between georgic authenticity and pastoral idealisation would hardly have been clarified by recourse to the term “eco-georgic”.

Non-Fiction

There are at least three kinds of contemporary georgic non-fiction writing, although there is some degree of overlap between them, and their literary quality may be variable. They range from traditional instructional georgic to the georgic of personal memoir, to a future-oriented georgic that might appear to run counter to husbandry altogether. There is no reason why these three categories cannot also be found in georgic poetry and fiction, but in georgic non-fiction they are more prominent in their distinctiveness, which, in turn, enables one to observe aspects of their hybridity. Personal memoir may naturally lead to future-oriented georgic, as in the urban bee-keeping of Helen Jukes. In the case of James Rebanks and Isabella Tree, personal memoir and future-oriented georgic, respectively, each strongly refer back to traditionally learned practices that might have appeared in instructional georgic writing.

In the first category, accounts of the georgic year for gardeners and agriculturalists continue a tradition that includes sixteenth century herbalists and eighteenth century books of the seasons. The seasonally-focussed *The River Cottage Year* (2003), by cook Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, might be taken as representative of the cottage garden strand of georgic gardening books that remain as popular as ever in the twenty-first century, especially in a time of home-focussed activity during a pandemic. The BBC TV programme *Countryfile*, with an average audience of six million viewers, is the UK’s most popular weekly factual series. Each week it features an update from the Cotswold farmer Adam Henson, whose book *Countryfile: Adam’s Farm: My Life on the Land* (2011), is one of his six books about aspects of his life on an extensive mixed farm. This is a personalised, readable book which gives a strong sense of the way modern mixed farming is dominated

by market prices and changes in regulation. Practicalities dominate, rather than personal family details, bar Henson's celebration of his father's passion, inherited by his son, for saving rare breeds and training sheepdogs.

A much more troubled tone dominates John Connell's *The Cow Book: A Story of Life on a Family Farm* (2018), a georgic memoir that is both an immediate record and an account of the historical role of the cow in human culture. It is a hybrid of history and myth coupled with an account of present tensions between father and son, raising cows in County Longford, two hours from Dublin. It opens with the author, twenty-nine years old and returned from two failed careers in Canada and Australia, delivering a calf for the first time alone on his family farm, needing to prove himself to his father, and to himself. The uncertain masculinities of son and father, in their obstinacy and their recurrent anger, are a theme of the narrative. As a failed emigrant Connell's musings on the place of the cow in world history consider its role in changing human diet and motivating migration, whilst in the present he consults the world-wide web on symptoms of cow disease. Meanwhile his mother runs a Montessori play-school on the farm for parents who commute to Dublin, and further in the background sits his grandmother, the last woman in Ireland to receive the IRA widow's war pension. Layers of history, as in the *Georgics*, have a presence in the contemporary tensions of this Irish farming family. Connell came home to write a novel, but, drawn into earning his keep as a cattle farmer, produced a richly georgic hybrid of a book.

There are no uncertain masculinities in the macho and rather combative memoir of Cumbrian sheep farmer James Rebanks. He opens his book, *The Shepherd's Life* (2015), by delighting in characterising his school life as attempting to reduce teachers to tears. "One maths lesson was improved for me by a fist-fight between a pupil and the teacher" (xiii). Without regret, or further comment, he writes, "One boy who we bullied killed himself a few years later in his car" (xiii). He models himself on his father and grandfather who seek the respect of other sheep farmers. Of his grandfather, Rebanks declares without subtlety, "until his dying day, I thought the sun shone out of his backside" (3). But by the time he is twenty his disagreements with his father could turn violent: "On odd occasions we were dragged off each other, fists flying" (133). Actual shepherding, which is described in such loving georgic detail in the first half of the book, has become work over which he ultimately has little "control" when his father inherits the farm and has become his "boss". Adult education for A-levels gives him options and "something that I could control" (137). A History degree at Oxford is followed by work experience in a magazine's London office, from the windows of which nothing green can be seen. Rebanks returns to the family farm, which he had never really left, Oxford terms being only eight weeks long, where he realises that making judgements about breeding sheep "was more intellectually challenging than anything I had done [at Oxford]" (157). His conclusion exemplifies the rebarbative case this book is making for the "nobodies" (6) who work the landscape of the Lake District: "Shepherds are not thick. We are tuned to a different channel" (158).

Rebanks provides plenty of evidence for the way shepherds' knowledge and judgements are tuned to their fields and fells. "Grass is everything. We see a thousand

shades of green, like the Inuit sees different kinds of snow” (226). During lambing time, with sheep needing attention over a wide area, Rebanks must prioritise their needs: “I have a mental map of the sheep lambing at different places, and when I need to check again on each of them. It is like having a series of egg-timers in my brain for a number of ewes around the farm at different stages of giving birth” (250). This writing is graphic and imaginative in conveying a mode of working with a landscape and its challenges. Rebanks argues that losing such depth of knowledge, judgement and practices, especially in the face of the uncertainties of climate change, would be foolish. “It took traditional communities often thousands of years to learn by trial and error how to live and farm within the constraints of tough environments like ours” (228). Here Rebanks is speaking from the perspective of the part-time job he eventually found after Oxford as a farming adviser to UNESCO which takes him to “historic landscapes” (228) around the world that face similar challenges to his own. At the same time he has grown a family of his own and the love of land that permeates the first half of the book extends to his father and his own wife and children towards the end of the book, which has evolved into a complex georgic text graphically representing a particular British rural culture, even if it is one which does not actually feed his family fully. Rebanks’ life as a shepherd is only made possible by Rebanks Consulting Ltd.

Perhaps there could be no greater contrast with *The Shepherd’s Life* than Helen Jukes’ *A Honeybee Heart has Five Openings: A Year of Keeping Bees* (2018). Lacking in self-confidence, entering her thirties, and frustrated by office work, temporary addresses and no sign of a love-life, Jukes decides to keep bees in the garden of the terraced house in Oxford that she has just moved into to share with her friend, Becky. This memoir is about learning urban bee-keeping, but it is also an understated narrative about gaining trust and overcoming vulnerability in relationships, including, ultimately, in love. At every tentative stage of learning about honeybees and their husbandry, there is a quietly growing confidence in her relationship with Luke, her bee-keeping mentor who lives in London. Indeed, the whole book is about learning through relationships: “beekeeping is about more than gaining proximity to a hive: it’s about entering into a *relationship* with a colony” (33). The therapeutic aspects of this, as propounded by the British Beekeeping Association, are recognised by Jukes: “It seems you can’t get anywhere near bees without some mention of healing” (33). But Jukes is full of uncertainties. She actually consults and quotes the *Georgics* Book Four on the siting of her hive, although “Virgil doesn’t have much to say about terraced houses or rush-hour traffic” (31).

The research is handled lightly and always has implications for Jukes’ own thoughts and practices. She is in London for research and invites friends round for a meal, none of whom can make it, so she resorts to inviting a friend of a friend she’s not met who she thinks is a beekeeper. Pat turns out not to be one. But his bones close to his skin reminds her of “the brittle chitin of bee wings” (194). It is an observation made in passing and he fades from the narrative until Jukes visits him in London, wanting to tell him “what’s been happening with the bees. But I don’t tell him about the bees just then. I tell him I want to kiss him” (232). In the pause that follows this she is “immensely

uncomfortable” (232). So the honey harvest at the end of the year is accompanied by another kind of emotional harvest. Only on the final page of the book is this reflected upon:

How to shake the feeling I have when I look at him sometimes that he is not separate from the hive? That through this experience of beekeeping, of learning about and listening to the colony, I might have called something up – might have begun to articulate and name a capacity I was missing, a connection I needed? (282)

Jukes calls this “a particular kind of sensitivity, a quality of attention” (282) and it is what the memoir mode of contemporary georgic writing at its best can evoke when inner nature grows through the husbandry of outer nature.

A third mode of contemporary georgic writing might be called “radically future-oriented georgic”, and it is named in James Rebanks’ list of threats to small family farms suggesting “that we, small farmers, were yesterday’s people; the future of our landscape would be tourism and wildlife and trees and wilding” (120). Of course, georgic is always future-orientated, making its best guesses based upon past experience about what will work, but a radical break with past practices such as “wilding” is clearly “future-orientated georgic”. The literature of “regenerative agriculture”, of which Rebanks’ work might be considered a part, together with books on rewilding, is obviously very much future-orientated with varying degrees of radicalism. What Rebanks has in mind is George Monbiot’s provocatively radical book *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (2015). Trees and wildlife are precisely what Monbiot argues have been repressed by what he calls the “sheepwrecking” of much of Britain’s uplands, uplands that he characterises as an ecological “desert” (154-166). Rebanks’ tone may well have been prompted by Monbiot’s positioning of farmers, as opposed to non-farming rural people, who make up 95 per cent of the rural population of Wales, for example, as a “small minority” (166). Whilst acknowledging that “Hill farmers are trying only to survive, and theirs is a tough, thankless and precarious occupation” (158), Monbiot completely fails to comprehend the argument of farmers like Rebanks that this is much more than an “occupation,” but a deeply georgic commitment to land and family tradition that goes back thousands of years. Actually, Monbiot’s book is not strictly georgic, but a polemical intervention in European land-use, farming and conservation debates. His personal engagements with specific places read like either traditional pastoral moments of epiphany, as in “I was at that moment transported by the thought [...]” (33), or as visions of a “pure” pastoral ideal without humans: “I pictured trees returning to the bare slopes, fish and whales returning to the bay” (268).

Of course, Monbiot is right to point out that British farming practices and upland land-use have, for centuries, resulted in an ecological disaster that has contributed to what has been recognised by Elizabeth Kolbert (2015) as the sixth extinction. That this has been intensified in Britain by contemporary forms of husbandry has been demonstrated by Mark Cocker in *Our Place: Can We Save Britain’s Wildlife Before It Is Too Late?* (2018), by Ian Newton in *Farming and Birds* (2017), and in relation to the husbandry required for the monoculture of grouse shooting on upland moors by Mark Avery’s *Inglorious: Conflict in the Uplands* (2015). The book which offers a georgic response to these debates is Isabella Tree’s *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm* (2018).

Whilst Monbiot dreams of reintroducing wolves, elk and even elephants, with no georgic strategies for new stages of human co-occupation, in 2001 Isabella Tree and her husband Charlie Burrell simply wanted to abandon intensive agriculture on their unprofitable mixed farm on the Knepp Estate in West Sussex and initially see what reintroduced itself. Whilst Monbiot's book is in the idealised pastoral mode, Tree's is georgic in its practical compromises. Although her book is titled *Wilding*, Tree herself uses the term "rewilding" from the beginning, as in, "When we began rewilding our estate seventeen years ago [...]" (9), whilst recognising that it is a "contentious word" for neighbouring farmers (97).¹ Charlie Burrell is a trustee of the organisation Monbiot established in 2015, Rewilding Britain. The second of this organisation's six aims places an emphasis on the role of humans: "Rewilding can empower rural communities to diversify their economies, and plan for a future with new opportunities and minimal reliance on grants and subsidies" (Rewilding Britain). Tree's story of the decisions taken on the Knepp Estate demonstrates that rewilding is husbandry, one form of what are known as "nature-based economies." Apart from wildlife tourism, Rewilding Britain suggests that there are two further forms of income for such economies: "i) sustainable hunting and fishing, forestry, and the harvesting of wild natural products in buffer areas and ii) payments for ecosystem services (e.g. for peatland restoration, woodland regeneration, flood mitigation and carbon sequestration)." Some of these activities require skills that Virgil would recognise, although "eco-tourism" safari trips might have confused him.

The basis of Knepp's change of land management was to rediscover ancient georgic knowledge that was thought to have been largely lost in the British countryside. The first was that a mix of herbivores is mutually beneficial, as different feeding habits by different animals provide different grazing niches for different kinds of mouths: "facilitation grazing" (159). The second was that, since this prevented closed-canopy tree cover, wood pasture is created which is the most species-rich form of habitat. Introducing a mixture of free-roaming wild ponies, pigs, fallow deer and old English longhorn cattle provided for the dynamic of facilitation grazing. One of the striking georgic qualities of Tree's book is the way nature and context forced her to compromise what she thought of as her ideal practices. Even on a large estate, some free-roaming had to be curtailed, and not just to preserve the polo pitch(!). If some income was to be derived from "the harvesting of wild natural products" in the form of free-range beef, DEFRA required calves to be tagged after birth. But knowing exactly where on the estate a cow had chosen for her birthing spot at any time of year, and exactly how many were calving at any one time, led to the bulls being given access to the cows at restricted times of year so that a calving period was created to facilitate tagging. The very choice of the breed of cattle to be longhorns, that tend to be more docile, was a consequence of the estate having rights of way across it, and the need to avoid confrontations between dog-walkers and cattle.

What has become well-known about this project is that the habitat that emerged provided unexpected homes for purple emperor butterflies, nightingales, turtle doves and twenty-three species of dung beetles in a single cow pat (114). It has also enabled several

¹ See Fenton for a rather different Scottish view on rewilding.

reintroductions, the latest of which is the first successful breeding by wild white storks in Britain since the English civil war. This challenging form of husbandry (the storks ignored platforms provided for them and evaded cameras put up at their previous year's unsuccessful nest) only increases the potential income from Knepp's wildlife safaris and tourism business. Isabella Tree documents all this in her book with a grace that can verge on idealised pastoral. In the final paragraph of her chapter on the turtle dove, which was nearly shot to extinction, Tree might be forgiven for a lyrical reflection on its call: "The gentle mournfulness of its call seemed to plead for a change of heart. A lament from the wild. An unrequited love song. A swansong" (208). But she also offers a plea for a return to ancient knowledge in what amounts to her proposal for a future georgic: "Rather than redesign the future, we could heed the accumulated wisdom of the past. We could eat less meat, and return to traditional methods of rearing animals" (252).

This is clearly not "post-georgic" since it is actually a form of husbandry that, whilst making the necessary compromises demanded by its contemporary British context, returns to a grazing regime that Virgil describes in the *Georgics*. For the same reason it would be a distortion of these traditions to categorise *Wilding* as a work of "eco-georgic", despite the way that the book has itself drawn visitors to the estate for what some would call "eco-tourism". Wildlife tourism is a by-product of the future-oriented georgic work of managing rewilded land. What *Wilding* does is to invite speculation on how future-oriented georgic writing might add new dimensions to contemporary georgic fiction and non-fiction by rediscovering ancient traditions of human relations with land, sea, creatures, plants and weather. For example, maybe what is needed for a future-oriented georgic is a kind of radical twenty-first century animism to embed enchantment into contemporary georgic writing (see Deer 2021). James Rebanks knows the personality of each of his sheep and their modes of agency. He would argue that this is not a "new-age" sensibility, but one developed from georgic knowledge gained by attentive lived experience over generations. Monbiot's "search for enchantment" in his sub-title can be gained through the new sense of agency that is now being recognised in trees, for example, as popularised by Peter Wohlleben in *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2017). As Rebanks and Tree might argue, some of this has been intuited and handed down by centuries of traditional knowledge. "Trees know various ways of propagation," wrote Virgil in Wilkinson's translation (77), recognising their agency. In Peter Fallon's Irish farmer's translation, Virgil exhorts his readers, "So, come on, countrymen, and learn the character of every species" (Fallon 40). Learning and intuiting what nature knows and working with it has always been at the heart of georgic writing. Georgic writing has always been an act of biosemiotics, that of reading the signs in the environment and its inhabitants to adjust behaviour and best practices. A contemporary georgic sense of a radical mutual agency that has a continuity with past knowledge is perhaps alive but implicit in underpinning some of texts that have been discussed here as representative of contemporary georgic literature.

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