



VINTAGE

THE WORM
FORGIVES THE
PLOUGH

JOHN STEWART COLLIS

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About the Book

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT MACFARLANE

During the Second World War, John Stewart Collis volunteered to leave his comfortable life as an academic to work on the land for the war effort. His account of this time perfectly captures the soft-handed, city-dweller's naivety and wonder both at the workings of nature and the toughness of life on a farm. It's set in the south of England and comprises exquisitely written sections on whatever happens to take Collis's fancy and inspire his thoughtful curiosity, ranging from humorous sketches of the characters he works alongside; mini-essays such as 'Contemplation upon Ants', 'The Mystery of Clouds', 'Colloquy on the Rick', 'Meditation while Singling Mangolds', 'The Garden of Eden' and celebrations of the earthworm, pea and potato. His mind ranges far and wide through literature science and philosophy as well as amazing descriptive writing, which makes for a book that is as uncategorisable as it is enchanting.

About the Author

John Stewart Collis was born in 1900. His father was a Dublin solicitor and Collis was educated at Rugby School and Balliol College, Oxford. In 1925 he published a biography of George Bernard Shaw and he went on to write other biographical works. He later became a pioneer of the ecological movement in Britain. During the Second World War his wife and daughters were evacuated to the United States and he worked for the Land Army as an agricultural labourer on farms in southern England - accompanied by his beloved dog, Bindo. His memoirs and meditations on rural life, *While Following the Plough* (1946) and *Down to Earth* (1947) were first published together as *The Worm Forgives the Plough* in 1973. John Stewart Collis died in 1984.

ALSO BY JOHN STEWART COLLIS

Shaw

Forward to Nature

Farewell to Argument

The Sounding Cataract

An Irishman's England

An Artist of Life

Marriage and Genius

Leo Tolstoy

The Carlyles

Bound Upon a Course

Christopher Columbus

Living with a Stranger

The Vision of Glory

The cut worm forgives the plough
WILLIAM BLAKE, *Proverbs of Hell*

The Worm Forgives the Plough

John Stewart Collis

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION

'I am anxious to say a word about the potato', begins the second part of *The Worm Forgives the Plough*. And there, really, you have John Stewart Collis in a nutshell, or at least a tuber. The mock deference (that hat-holding 'anxious'); the dry humour, trading on bathos; and the interest in those scraps and squibs of the world over which the eye usually slides. For Collis - woodsman, ecologist, biographer, farmer, memoirist - was animated by what he called 'the extraordinary in the ordinary'. To him, 'mundane' meant fabulously-of-this-earth, rather than tediously commonplace. He was (to borrow a phrase from another farmer-naturalist-writer, Les Murray) 'only interested in everything'. His imagination was unmotivated by grandeur; he experienced beauty as a scalable quality: present in a sky-filling cloud reef, yes, but equally in the leaf litter on a wood floor. His only fixed beliefs, as far as I can tell, were that work - labour; contact; touch - was a prerequisite of durable knowledge, and that cutting dung-slabs from dung-heaps was pretty much the nicest task known to man.

John Stewart Collis was as old as his century. Born in 1900, while the Siege of Mafeking was underway, he died in 1984 during the Miners' Strike. At the age of twenty-five he published his first biography (of George Bernard Shaw; the book is still well-regarded by Shavians). Lives of Havelock Ellis, August Strindberg, Leo Tolstoy and Christopher Columbus followed over the subsequent fifteen years. Then the Second World War began. Collis was offered a post in the Army, but he asked instead to become an agricultural labourer: one of a few thousand men and more than eighty

thousand women – The Land Girls – sent to the countryside after 1940, in order to replace the farm workers who had enlisted. ‘I had hitherto regarded the world too much from the outside, and I wished to become more involved in it,’ Collis recalled, when asked why he had chosen to work on the land. ‘I wished to become thoroughly implicated in the fields’. One notes with pleasure his use of the verb ‘implicate’, recalling its etymological origin as a strenuous action; from the Latin *plicare*, to fold or twist.

And he did become implicated, strenuously so. For almost six years Collis laboured, in various capacities and in various parts of England. First as a bottom-of-the-pile farmhand on a fruit and arable farm in Sussex: hoeing, stacking, spraying, harrowing. Subsequently on a dairy and arable farm in Dorset: hiling, broadcasting, rick-building, ploughing. Then after the war he was offered a job thinning a fourteen-acre ash wood near Iwerne Minster in Dorset. For a year, Collis toiled alone in the wood, clearing the understorey of honeysuckle and ivy, and felling trees by axe and handsaw – wanting nothing more than to be where he was and engaged in what he was doing.

Two remarkable books arose from these years, which are now published together as *The Worm Forgives the Plough*. The first, *While Following the Plough* (1946), describes the wartime work in Sussex and Dorset; the second, *Down to Earth* (1947), the year spent in the ash wood. Both books are structured as a mosaic of tiny essaylets, riffs, visions, meditations and comic set-pieces (such as ‘My Furrow’, where he describes ploughing his first field-length, the result resembling a woozy sine-wave rather than a furrow; or his account of the blustery farmer Arthur Miles, whose favourite – and often only – word was ‘bugger’). It strikes me that the books could respectively be subtitled *In Praise of Work* and *In Praise of Idling*, with no contradiction of spirit implied between them. For Collis, work lent a lustre to laziness, and laziness – in its full form as a virtue, meaning restorative

haystack-snoozes, tree-foot meditations, physical down time – burnished work.

Collis was living and writing on the eve of an agricultural revolution. In the two decades after the Second World War, British farming was transformed. The corn-rick and the hayrick became extinct. The subsidy system was enshrined by the 1947 Agriculture Act. The small family farm began its decline, and the mega-farm its rise. Monoculture widely replaced the patchworked and improvised farming that Collis experienced. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides were used in escalating quantities. ‘The change of scene followed rather swiftly’, wrote Collis with characteristic understatement. ‘Thus this book is about the last of its kind that can now be written in England.’

Collis isn’t an elegist, however, though his books do possess a back-echo of sadness and loss. No, he was far too allergic to sentiment to mourn the arrival of full mechanisation, or the passing of an era. Nor is he a nature writer, whatever that is. If it’s worth calling him anything, then he’s probably a writer of the land (that’s ‘the land’, with its hard-won definite article, rather than ‘landscape’, with its associations of leisure, tourism, the view). His great subject is the ‘unique struggle’ of the labourer with the earth: a battle that incites affection, boredom, exhaustion and delight in mixed measures. Here he is on that subject, letting Old Testament rhythms rumble around his prose like apples in barrel, half-seriously, half-parodically:

The spirit of the ancient Earth is sterner [than that of water]. Her demands are not only too great, but too constant to allow those who battle with her any relaxation, any contemplation, any ideology, any interest in the spirit and the mind . . . He shall be kept submerged in his great task by perpetual apprehension of failure and ruin.

Collis is no elegist, also, because he lives so intently in the present. He writes wonderfully of physical pleasure. ‘To sit in the sun. This is still one of the greatest experiences of life

for us in the West . . . I have said I sat in the sun, but more often I *lay* in it.' Falling asleep under an ash tree, he finds himself 'almost sinking into, melting into the earth', experiencing 'a joyous sinking down . . . I became little higher than an animal - and no lower.' He recalls heaping ash logs onto a hearth-fire, and how 'the bitter cold of a winter's evening was transformed by the white-hot wood, and I was nearly as happy in front of this earthly flame as in the summer under the sun.' In his love of heat and sunshine, he's kindred with another unsentimental English pastoralist, Richard Jefferies, who once described feeling the sun play upon him so powerfully that it seemed to blaze through every cell, and melt him into the grassy Wiltshire hillside on which he was lying.

Collis's other family resemblance - less expected - is to Samuel Beckett. In August 1942, the French resistance cell with which Beckett had been working for two years was compromised. He and his wife Suzanne fled - escaping by hours from the Gestapo swoop - and worked their way south through France, eventually reaching the village of Roussillon, not far from the Côte d'Azur. There they settled, and for nearly three years, Beckett worked unpaid in the fields, woodlands and vineyards of a nearby farm: pruning, picking, harvesting, clearing. He became respected among the other workers for his powers of endurance under even the fiercest summer sun, and his apparent indifference to tedium or injury. It was during these same years that Beckett wrote one of the great works about work, his novel *Watt*, in which phrases loop and repeat to create an atmosphere of antic tedium, of agitated boredom, of longing for an end that never comes. Both Beckett and Collis brilliantly evoke *ennui* and its different shades; and both know the ability of certain kinds of labour not to stimulate thought but to abolish it entirely. Yet where Beckett chose to embody the experience of work grammatically and formally,

Collis preferred to describe it. Reading Beckett is effortful; his prose exerts the reader. Reading Collis is easy, joyful.

'I do not possess the politician's and the sociologist's imagination to grasp the actuality without precision', Collis once observed, acidly. 'I have to get in touch with it first through work. For me it is first the tool, then the book'. In this respect, he belongs to a very English intellectual tradition of enlightenment through work: a dynasty of male manual mystics that begins with William Cobbett, includes John Ruskin, William Morris, Edward Carpenter, Henry Williamson, H.J. Massingham, Rolf Gardiner, Collis himself, George Ewart Evans, and ends up latterly with Roger Deakin, whose *Wildwood* (2007) contains some of the finest writing about wood-work - the work of wood, work with wood - since Collis. 'I continually have day-dreams of a time when lots of people would come out into the fields and love working with their hands,' writes Collis, sounding just like Ruskin, 'and also love working with the mind . . . and make such jobs as these go quickly and delightfully'. His book is a manual in the full sense of the word. Read it, and you'll learn how to keep an axe sharp; how to cut a tree down, leaving a clean cuneiform summit to the stump; how to stack a rick (it requires an audacious cantilevering technique), how to hoe mangolds, how to subdue spraying machines, and many other such things you never knew you wanted to know.

Of course, several of these work-worshippers developed thoroughly repellent politics. It has often been the case - and especially among English land-lovers - that writers about 'connection' with place entangle themselves in dubious thought. The idea of 'connection' leads quickly to 'belonging', and 'belonging' leads of necessity to 'exclusion', and so the chimera of ethnicity based on descent and homeland is summoned. Take Henry Williamson, for instance, who farmed land around Stiffkey in North Norfolk, travelled to Nuremberg to hear Hitler in 1936,

and on his return joined the British Union of Fascists, contributing articles on agriculture for Moseley's journal *Action*. Then there was Collis's acquaintance Rolf Gardiner, who owned the ash wood which Collis thinned. Gardiner was a heterodox and largely untrustworthy interwar prophet, whose ambition was to reintegrate culture, work and religion through an organic relationship with the land. His thinking began harmlessly enough – extolling Morris Dancing as a way to cleanse the male soul, for instance – but curdled over time into a Saxon revivalism, and eventually into a full-blown *Blut und Boden* Germanic vision of the need for 'blood contact with the living past of the English earth', of agriculture as a means of contact with the 'holy soil', and of the need to restore a robust peasant class.

Given his connection to Gardiner, Collis's writing is remarkably free of taint. Collis was protected in part by a common-sense Fabianism, born out of his early contact with Shaw. But he was also protected by the deep structure of his metaphysics. Collis was an inductive thinker, which is to say he believed in things before ideas, and this – together with his allergy to sentiment – left him intuitively suspicious of totalising systems of thought. Large-scale political visions falsely inverted the relationship between idea and thing:

I have spent some time in the company of the philosophers and the priests, and have undertaken long journeys with them in search of the Absolute. It was all necessary. For only then could I understand that it was not necessary, and that if we look out of the window the answer is there.

Collis approached the world from a presupposition of his own ignorance. His dreams of a world in which people loved to work were not – unlike Gardiner's – programmatic in nature. They were dreams only; idle doodles, jotted fantasies of a world where all Cabinet Ministers were first cabinet makers. At its simplest, indeed, *The Worm Forgives the Plough* is a book about learning how to see, rather than learning how to live: 'I realised with what fresh eyes I could

now see a field, this field . . . I no longer hung in the void, but had entered in at the door of labour and become part of the world of work in its humblest and yet proudest place’.

Collis is also funny, where Gardiner was not: mischievous, satirical, irreverent, and sharp-taloned with regard to pomposity or excessive sincerity. Early in the first book, he reflects how many simple problems on a farm can be solved by wire: wire used to twist and tighten, to fix this to that, to hook and fasten. Humour is Collis’s writerly version of wire, with which he hitches section to section, thought to thought, in his fabulously disjointed books. His favourite comic mode is that very English technique of litotes. To say Collis uses understatement to good effect would be an understatement. He seems to have realised that litotes was the ideal manner in which to write humorously about work and exertion, offering as it does the greatest economy of effort. ‘I have no objection whatever to standing on a dunghill. There is no place where I am more content to stand’; ‘The elder is a bush posing as a tree, a tree failing to be a bush’. Sometimes his one-liners take the form of swipes. ‘There is a tendency amongst some passionate middle-class meliorists to give the working-class man virtues he does not possess.’ Whack! ‘It is surely the mark of an inferior mind to be moved to wonder by the exception instead of the rule.’ Slam!

I am always wary of those declarations that X or Y is ‘a book that everyone must read’. The imperative is alarmingly coercive, smacking of diktats, of the *Little Red Book*, or that ill-imagined ‘cultural initiative’ whereby every second adult in Holland was issued with a free copy of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Fury* (a novel so toothless and un-angry that it should have been retitled *Furry*). But *The Worm Forgives the Plough* is, unmistakably, a book that a lot of a people should read. Like many British works written in the later 1940s and 1950s, its time looks to have come round again. The carousel has turned: the post-war atmosphere of selective

austerity, deferred desire and earned pleasure, sustainability rather than waste, a yearning for connection and contact, is recognisable once more. Collis's love of the land and of work, his warnings about the disconnect between town and country, between consumer and producer (the 'agreed fantasy of illusion'), and about the easy seductions of the pastoral, all feel very contemporary. 'In towns men have become so far removed from the soil', he writes, 'that when we hear that a man has "soiled his hands" we know that he is suspected of crime'. Today, apocryphal stories circulate of British schoolchildren not knowing that milk comes from cows, not being able to identify a cucumber in a line-up of vegetables, and not being able to match leaf with tree. More pragmatically, Collis was attracted to non-intensive and mixed-method farming practices that now need to be embraced again. And more metaphysically, his practice of hewing close to the felt world, and his trusting to sensation as a kind of thought, appeal to increasing numbers of people. As he put it himself, 'I need never go out of fashion. For I have never been in the fashion. I am always with it.' Just so.

Robert Macfarlane, 2009

BOOK ONE

WHILE FOLLOWING THE PLOUGH

PREFACE

'WHAT MADE YOU go and work on the land?' I have so frequently been asked the question that perhaps an answer should be attempted. When a reason is completely obvious to oneself it is often difficult to explain it. Since 'because I very much wanted to' will not serve, I must be more explicit. While not refusing the term 'an intellectual' as applied to myself, since I believe in the Mind more than in anything else, I had hitherto regarded the world too much from the outside, and I wished to become more involved in it. The war gave me the opportunity. The previous war had left me as an Honorary Lieutenant in the Irish Guards, for it had stopped when I was at an Officer Cadet Battalion, and in 1940 I was offered an Army post. Since it was clear to me that I would be given some home job for which I should be entirely unfitted, I asked to be excused in favour of agriculture. This granted, I gained the opportunity of becoming thoroughly implicated in the fields instead of being merely a spectator of them.

I worked at this for nearly six years, a period which included much forestry, though I have not written of that experience in this volume. For the sake of unity I have restricted my narrative within given periods of time. My approach is one of genuine ignorance, and I have described many operations and implements as if the reader were as fresh to them as I was. Hence there is no instruction in this book; and I fear that my views tend to be as inconsistent as my moods, for my chief aim has been to present my physical and mental reactions regardless of their

consistency, and to give a truthful picture of what I found in the agricultural world.

JOHN STEWART COLLIS

This book was written just before both the corn-rick and the hayrick were deemed unnecessary by modern methods. The change of scene followed rather swiftly. Thus this book is about the last of its kind that can now be written in England.

JSC, 1973

PART ONE

A FARM IN SOUTH-EAST ENGLAND

1 My First Job

IT WAS 16 APRIL 1940. I could find no lodging close to the farm, but a friend did me the great service of putting me up at her cottage which was about thirty-five minutes' bicycle-ride distance. This meant rising in time to shave, breakfast, sandwich food for the day, and be ready to start out by six-thirty. I had always wanted something to force me up at this hour, this unsmirched hour of promise and of hope; and now I stepped out into a clear morning, with frost laid across the whole land, the air biting, and the hollows clouded. I arrived at the farm punctually, trying not to feel nervous and like a new boy at school. I gave up shyness some time ago when I realized that it was a form of self-consciousness and conceit, as well as being, like bad manners, a sign of ignorance of human nature; but to turn up into a completely new milieu - and not looking the part in person or clothes - to meet employers and employees and do something I had never done before, certainly made me apprehensive.

The foreman came out and shook hands and we walked across the farm towards some job that had been arranged for me. He was about thirty, non-rustic in appearance, quiet, accentless, pleasant, and exceedingly grave. We walked past some acres of fruit trees, for it was more than half a fruit farm, till we arrived at some ranks of apple trees. Their

branches had been cut off and a new kind had evidently been grafted. My job consisted of dragging away and piling up the branches that lay on the ground.

The foreman went off and I was left alone at this my first job on the land. It was not very inspiring, but it was at least foolproof. I worked on for what I felt to be a very long time – nine hours to be exact, with one break, before the day was done. Already I began to ask at intervals what I discovered later is quite a famous question amongst agricultural labourers – *what is the time?* And after a few hours I began to feel lonely. This was a new experience and foreign to me; for complete isolation with a book is Solitude, a blessed state; but isolation with physical labour can be Loneliness, a very different thing. In the distance I could hear the chug of a machine (it was the spraying engine), a most welcome and important noise. I should have liked to get closer to it. Funny, I thought, that in the first few hours of labour on the land I should welcome the sound and long for the sight of a piece of machinery!

I had plenty of time to examine the grafting. Attached to the stumps where the branches had been cut off, were twigs about the size of a short pencil. Each was attached in a highly skilled manner, as if glued on by some black substance, and tied round with thread. The foreman told me that these apple trees were cookers and would require too much sugar to sell at a profit, so they were putting a sweeter apple on to the trees. I knew nothing whatever about grafting, and it surprised me that this could be done, now that I saw it in front of me.

When I had made some big piles of branches I was instructed to burn them, which I did. A pleasant task – for to reduce bulk to practically nothing, to make a hard thing soft, to cause substance to become insubstantial, is as interesting as making something out of nothing.

2 Broadcasting Artificial Manure

After a few days my next job conducted me nearer the centre of the agricultural world: the spreading of artificial manure. Taking a horse and cart from the stable, Morgan (that was the name of the foreman) and I went across the farm to a far field which had been reserved for potatoes. It was a beautiful morning, and as we jogged along in the early sunshine with a wide view of the countryside and passed by a field of corn coming up and looking more like a green light than a green object, I thought how pleasant it was to be here and to be doing this *as my job* - no longer to be looking at a horse and cart jogging through a field, but to be part of it now, to be *on the field* instead of a spectator of it. And I also reflected that if the countryman receives less pay than the townsman, he should not mind, since the latter ought to be compensated for his self-sacrificing denial of essentials.

We filled up with artificial at an old oast-house that served as a lower stable and barn. I had heard of artificial manure but that's about all, never seen it nor even considered what it looked like. Anyway, here was the stuff in front of me, neatly parcelled up in sacks of hundredweights and half-hundredweights. There were two kinds here, one a substance like very fine sand which I gathered was superphosphate, the other like salt which was potash. We loaded the superphosphate on the cart and brought it to the field, dropping the sacks at fixed intervals along the edge. This done we proceeded to broadcast it. The method was simple. We each filled a bucket, slung its rope over head and shoulder, and then holding the bucket steady with one hand, scattered the manure with the other at the rate of one handful to every second step as we advanced across the field. From a distance it would look the same as sowing grain.

A rather strong wind blew and the powder flew up into our eyes so frequently and so painfully that we had to give up and sow potash instead - which being much heavier and

moister is not blown about by the wind. Thus we sowed the potash walking forward and backward across the field, filling up our buckets at each end, for the rest of the morning and the whole afternoon. The ground of course was extremely uneven and I stumbled over the clods as I walked. I now remembered the word *clod-hopper*, the term of reproach reserved by townsmen for those who produce food, and I was interested to touch the reality. On account of my very early breakfast, with only a snatched bite since, I began to wonder if I could really last out till dinner. At length the great moment came when we knocked off, and then I experienced a pleasure in just *sitting down*, and in eating cheese, such as I have never known before.

After this I did a lot more manuring on my own for several days. One afternoon I sowed potash up and down twenty-five long rows of blackcurrant trees and plums. Up and down, filling my bucket at each end until eight sacks were empty, five hours had passed and it was five-thirty. It struck me as qualifying for the term 'grinding toil'. I found these long afternoons something of an endurance test. Owing to laziness I possess a secret reserve of strength, and was not afraid that I wouldn't be equal to anything that turned up with regard to physical labour; but that afternoon's expedition, and subsequent work, seemed to me long drawn out. This opinion of mine, soon formed, never abandoned, I found held good for all labourers on the land not doing the more interesting jobs.

However, this particular job evidently left something to show for it, and to my amazement it made an impression on the foreman who remarked on it favourably the next day.

Continuing further at this I began to feel that it could now fairly be said that I was familiar with artificial manure - commercially spoken of as fertilizer. But at this stage I can put forward no opinion on the great Artificial v. Pure Compost problem. I have watched the waging of this war with some care, but consider myself as yet too much a

provincial in truth concerning this matter even to state a preference. Yet talking of schools of thought on the subject, it seems that should you live in the USSR it would be wise to watch your step about this. Arthur Koestler in his *Darkness At Noon* says: 'A short time ago, our leading agriculturalist, B, was shot with thirty of his collaborators because he maintained the opinion that nitrate artificial manure was superior to potash. Number 1 is all for potash; therefore B and the thirty had to be liquidated as saboteurs.' Now in England if anyone disagrees with anyone else he doesn't get angry, he just says: 'That's a point of view anyway, old man.' This may not promote progress. Yet some of the thirty-one nitrate-supporters may have secretly wished that Number 1 - i.e. Stalin - was less un-English.

Without airing views on this subject I may add that one day, having been instructed to spread some artificial and to get the sacks, and not remembering whether it was potash or superphosphate that was to be used, I asked by a slip of the tongue: 'Which sort of *superficial manure* am I to use?' This was greeted with laughter by the boss who was not totally devoid of a sense of humour, and though a great supporter of these fertilizers, seemed to discern some slight element of justice or irony in this strange nomenclature.

3 My Furrow

Presently I found myself back on the potato field broadcasting a final portion with 'super', while Morgan harrowed with a tractor, and the carter, a genial young Dane, ploughed open furrows for potato planting.

When the coast was clear later on I asked the carter if I might try my hand at ploughing a few furrows. I knew that he would be far from pleased at the request, but putting my pride in my pocket (a thing I do all my life at intervals with deliberation), and going on the principle that 'nothing dare, nothing do' I approached the ploughman. And as it is harder

to refuse than to acquiesce in such things, he let me try. He said he would lead the horse (only one was being used) the first time, while I managed the plough. This was an easy way of starting. Even so I immediately felt in need of four hands, two for reins and two for plough. However, imitating this man's method, I put the reins over my head till they were held taut round the right shoulder and under the left arm. And since the horse was started and led by my companion I reached the bottom of the field leaving behind a moderately straight furrow. It would be hard to make a complete bosh of this under the above condition. We returned to the other end again without marked mishap. Then I took over the whole thing. Now I would plough a furrow. It was a psychological necessity for me to plough a furrow - at last about to be fulfilled. I took up my position, and it only remained for me to proceed.

The horse refused to move.

I urged it forward, but it then moved sideways, upsetting the plough. And I spent some time in putting it into position again.

It then moved over the other side with the same result. I had not yet advanced a step. My psychological furrow still remained in the realm of the imagination.

Once more I got into position. This time we did really start, we did really move forward. But after ten yards the horse swerved badly left. Using one hand for the reins, thus leaving only one on the plough, I pulled him round too much. Nevertheless we proceeded, but again owing to lack of rein control the horse went sideways and my furrow, after a few yards of near straightness, went west. Still, when I had reached the bottom the thing had been done. I had ploughed a furrow. It could hardly have been less straight, but a weight was lifted from my mind, for whatever geometrical terms might be necessary to describe my line, to me it was an Event - I had at any rate ploughed a furrow.

4 Potato Planting; Broadcasting Seed

A wet day now drew us indoors - into an old house, at a far corner of the farm, unoccupied and with no road to it. It was serving as a general storehouse for artificial and potatoes and tools. We made use of the wet day to prepare the potatoes for planting. From a pile on the floor we sorted out the medium ones for planting, putting those that were too small on one side, and splitting the large ones to serve as two. So the Potato now came into my field of vision as a definite object on its own. Not being a garden or allotment man I had hitherto never looked at a potato save with my mouth, as it were. Now I decided to fix my eye on it and follow its act.

Early in May we assembled for planting. The personnel included all who worked on the farm: the boss (who, though frequently called away on another job at this period, was present at most of the important occasions), Morgan, the Dane, a general labourer called Arthur Miles and his wife, a land girl, and myself. We each took a row, filled buckets from sacks placed at intervals down the field, and planted the potatoes in the furrows at one foot distance from each other - which seemed to me a lot of room for them to play in. I was glad to put them in and let them get on with it. They have no beauty to recommend them, it is their performance we admire, and now they could start moving. But I soon lost interest in them and became much more concerned with my back. Since it is necessary to carry a bucket and to place each potato right down in the furrow as you advance, the back-strain is unexampled - in fact there is no other agricultural job so hard on the back. A machine-planter has been invented of course, and is much in use. And a good job too, thought I, many thanks and salaams to the benefacting inventor. 'So you are a believer in thorough agricultural mechanization, are you?' 'Pardon me, but I'm in no fit state to think it out - my back's aching too much.

Empirically, as seen here regarding *this*, a machine seems excellent.' And I fear that machines come into the world, not following a principle, nor with an eye to future developments, nor in relation to the whole, but by fits and starts, one by one, each seeming splendid to those concerned. I have to admit that whatever views I might hold in the study concerning mechanization, on the field, from this labouring angle, I would cast a highly favourable eye upon any man who appeared with a potato-planter.

'What did you do today?' my friends often asked when I got home. 'Spread potash round the foot of fruit trees' was about all I sometimes could reply. Thus an accurate day-to-day account of life on a farm would be almost laughably dull - though I wish someone would do it if only for the benefit of the romanticists. But spreading potash at the foot of fruit trees was in no way an irksome job. You simply filled your bucket and circled round each tree in the line, throwing down handfuls of the manure in a circle well away from the foot of the stem - for the roots which it is designed to reach are spread several feet outwards. There was thick grass round most of the trees which I dressed thus, and I wondered how much good I was really doing. I did not care, for I was not responsible. I was most happy and at ease in my non-responsibility. No farmer can be at ease hanging daily upon the response of nature to his decisions.

While on this manuring job one day I noticed that a certain attractively situated field with a long view was being sown with corn by Arthur Miles. This farm (a little less than a hundred acres) had not gone in for much arable work, the concentration being on fruit, hence it was not fitted out with much equipment for the former. The old method of broadcasting seed was adopted. I saw that Arthur Miles, who seemed to do anything and everything, was engaged at this. And just as I had longed to put my hand on a plough, so again I felt the strongest desire to broadcast a field, or some of it, in creative contrast with broadcasting artificial.

When the boss came round I asked him if I might take a turn. He was an understanding man and did not make fun of the awkward request. In fact he brought me up to the field and left me with Arthur Miles – though not going so far as to say anything to him about it. He just left me there. This made it a bit awkward. But again I overcame the resistance and he showed me how it was done. It is extremely concentrated work. You must walk straight and you must throw out the seed so as never to leave a patch uncovered. Thus, fixing your eye steadily upon an object at the end of the field, you start out, throwing the grain forward at every step. This means that the hand must work very quickly in seizing the grain from the bag or bucket slung by a strap over the shoulder, and the arm must go out evenly and rhythmically with the legs – otherwise there will be gaps and patches when the corn grows.

It was exactly this steady synchronization that I found most difficult and I did a portion of the field none too well, and made Miles none too pleased. But I did do that portion and never in my life felt better employed. I was doing the oldest and most necessary work known to man. When you do it by hand there is the further attraction that not only are you doing something necessary for the life of mankind, but you are outside the Machine Age, so that even if the machines went up in smoke you would remain untouched and could continue to work across the field. And if we are moved by the poetry of tradition and the procession of time, remembering that a two-thousand-years-old Parable held up the image of the Sower at the self-same task, we shall be glad indeed, if only for a brief period in our lives, if only once, to do likewise and cast abroad these envelopes of life.

5 The Old House

Another wet day followed and I was sent to the old house to crunch potash. This chemical, lying up all winter, gets

damper and damper, forming into hard lumps in the sacks. My job was to open the sacks, throw the potash on the floor. crunch it up into a fine powder and then repack it.

I carried on alone throughout the day at this, in the large old, empty house. Enormous beams, many doors, three stairways, attics, cellars - the whole empty save for the sacks of artificial, some broken chairs, one washbasin, tools and potatoes, and in an upper room an enormous bedstead fitted with mattress.

At lunch-time - or, more properly, dinner-time - I went into this upper room. The bed certainly was formidable - one of those old Victorian 'beds like battlefields', as George Moore described them. There I had my meal, using the mattress as table and chair. This house was tucked away in a lost corner, far from any other house, with no road or even pathway to it. A lonely mansion at the best of times; on that day, that desolate room, one window stuffed up, one broken, one filled with cardboard, the wind whistling, the rain without and the damp within, I felt discouraged and inclined towards melancholy. I lay down on the bed, using my haversack as pillow, and, curling up, placed my overcoat over my body and head. The wind rattled the panes and various doors banged, but I felt secure now and remote from the world, as if I had buried myself.

In spite of this I rose conscientiously after an hour and returned to the potash, and while crunching the strange white substance tried to grapple with the mystery of its action against the potatoes that I had put in the ground - and was irritated beyond measure by my ignorance.

The afternoon seemed remarkably long - longer than the usual longness. And no wonder, for my watch had stopped and I had worked two hours' overtime - for continuing to hear the distant chug-chug of the spraying-machine, I thought it could not yet be five-thirty, but there had evidently been a pause for tea, and then on again. So that day my hours were from 5.30 a.m. when I rose, till 8 p.m.

when I got back. Going home I remembered that I had to get some eggs (you could still get eggs at this time). After some searching up a hill I found the place and bought the eggs. The woman who gave them to me also gave me three small cakes gratis, for I had impressed her with 'a tired look'. This was encouraging. I seldom succeed in working either long enough or hard enough to look properly tired, and this was the first time in my life that a kind woman had taken pity on me as a worn-out man and given me three cakes.

If you have a fair distance to cycle to your work, then the question as to whether it is uphill going or coming back is of some moment - freshly considered every day. Is it better to have it downhill on the way to work? Yes, for as you always start out late you can arrive on time. But the return home! A slow push up a long slant is no pleasing prospect to the labourer who has achieved his 5.30 p.m. That was to be my experience later. Here, going home I started with a long swoop down, lovely in the evening but imperfect in the morning. However, I now asked the boss whether instead of doing this long bicycle journey every day I could live in the old house, putting into it the furniture which soon had to be taken out of a house in Kent, my wife having to go in another direction. This was agreed to. There was no road to the house, as I have said - only a railway line! No doubt it once had a fine approach to it: some of it dated back to the Elizabethan era, I believe. But any such approach had long since been abandoned, and the house itself forgotten and finally lost. Only in England, with its forty-seven million inhabitants, could you actually lose a house.

However, during certain months of the year there was a sufficiency of dry ground and even a track to make approach by lorry possible, even to the doorway. But of course in the eyes of furniture removers and tradesmen it was 'out in the wilds'. This latter phrase is frequently heard in twentieth-century England. 'You *are* out in the wilds!' people will say to anyone in the Home Counties living

somewhere not on or very near a bus route, and perhaps two and a half miles from a railway station. Such is the imbecility to which industrialism can reduce a nation whose sons have travelled to the ends of the earth, pioneering and colonizing into the unknown and ruling millions of waves just for the fun of the thing.

Nevertheless I managed to persuade a firm to undertake this tremendous task. Unluckily, when the driver got near the house he left the hard track at one point and the van sank into swampy ground and had to be dug out. But in the end the furniture was carried into the house with amused condescension by the men.

I decided to occupy two rooms of the seven or eight - a large one upstairs, and the one underneath it, both supported by colossal beams. Thus beamed and buttressed by earlier centuries, I felt myself in a strong position. The ground floor of my bed-sitting room upstairs was uneven with age, as roughly wrinkled as the waves of the sea. Twelve beams crossed the ceiling from east to west, while a really fine one, besieged in vain by insects, crossed from north to south. The ancient cupboards, notched and dented by the artillery of Time, might well have concealed alarming skeletons. The fireplace was so wide that you could have put a child's bed into it. The long latticed window looked across at the old oast-house, which in the declension of the sharp evening light had a wood-cut perfection about it. And the evening, after-tea sun came into the room - one of the most soothing of all Nature's effects. It was an ideal room, and all the time I was there I thought how I would hate to leave it when the time came. But there was a curious draught near the door. When you approached it, it became quite windy, almost hat-blowing-off, even when it was calm outside. The cause was obscurely connected with the peculiar exit. It opened on to two doors, one trap-door, and two stairways, and whichever one was opened at this junction was banged by a cold tempest, the gale not coming from any certain