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### From *Country Conditions* (1936), 'Introductory', 'Chapter 2. The Labourers' and 'Appendix 1'

Valentine Ackland\*

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# From *Country Conditions* (1936), 'Introductory', 'Chapter 2. The Labourers' and 'Appendix 1'

*Valentine Ackland*

## Abstract

A sequence of poems and a short lyric by Valentine Ackland.

**Keywords** Valentine Ackland; poetry.

## INTRODUCTORY

Outwardly the small English village has altered very little in the last hundred years or so. The cottages are the same, or rather more dilapidated; the farms are the same; the bartons and milking-sheds stand in the same places, although they have been improved, and the 'main' roads are usually tarred; but otherwise nothing much has changed—to outward appearance.

Actually, however, the small villages are more isolated, by comparison, than they were a hundred years back; the labourers, with their families, live under worse conditions, by comparison with town workers, than they did in 1840.

Town workers cannot altogether be prevented from profiting by some of the modern 'aids to living.' Electric light and power, gas, water supply, drainage, motor transport, cheap entertainment, large bargain stores; all these make life easier and, in the main, cheaper; and there are plenty of people to say that these luxuries are responsible for the marked deterioration in the character of the working class, a deterioration which shows itself in an increased dissatisfaction with their lot.

Certainly there is not much expressed unrest among the rural workers. There are various reasons for this, of which the most important is the almost complete isolation, not only of every village, but of every man from his fellow; lonely work, very long hours, low wages, no holidays—all these things mean that the village labourer is kept without any means of contact with the world outside his village, and even his small village world is almost unknown to him.

A new barrier has arisen in the last hundred years between the labourer and the rest of the working class. His work has become apparently unimportant. The ordinary labourer has endured for his whole lifetime a perfectly constant ‘Great Slump,’ and the result is a deadening depression. He cannot see any hope in the future; it can hardly occur to him to look for it. Things have ‘always’ been hopeless, whatever changes there may have been in the Government or the outside world, whatever great improvements he reads of in the papers. Electricity, say, comes to the village. It does nothing for him. He cannot afford to have it fixed in ‘his’ cottage. Even if the farmer is sufficiently disinterested to have it installed in the milking-sheds, the worker profits very little; his hours are not shorter, his wages are not higher, he goes home at night to the same dilapidated cottage and smoky oil-lamp.

Because the country worker is no longer regarded as important to the life of the nation his character has changed a good deal. You do not often find that stubborn, independent spirit that in 1830 made the Kentish labourers so formidable to the ruling class: ‘Large rewards were promised from the first to informers, these rewards including a wise offer of establishment elsewhere, but the prize was refused, and rick-burning spread steadily through a second month. . . . The machine-breakers were reported not to take money or plunder, and to refuse it if offered. Their programme was extensive and formidable. When the High Sheriff attended one of their meetings to remonstrate with them, they listened to his homily with attention, but before dispersing one of them said: “We will destroy the corn-stacks and threshing machines this year, next year we will have a turn with the parsons, and the third year we will make war upon the statesmen.”’ (Hammond: *The Village Labourer, 1760–1832*.)

Recently some country workers, farmers chiefly, have had a ‘turn with the parsons’—and here the comparison is interesting. During the disturbances in 1830 we read that ‘it often happened that the farmers would agree to pay the wages demanded by the labourers, but would add that they could not continue to pay those wages unless rents and tithes

were reduced. The labourers generally took the hint—' (Hammond, *op. cit.*). In those days the farmers were ranged beside the labourers. In an account of another disturbance we read: 'The gentlemen stood up at the altar, while the farmers encouraged the labourers in the body of the church' (Hammond, *op. cit.*).

But things *are* different nowadays and at first it is difficult to see why. Conditions are hardly any better than they were in 1830. True, wages are higher, but consider the enormous possibilities for improvement of conditions: the modern labour-saving devices, domestic and agricultural; the improvements in common use in towns and cities; and then look at the countryside. Compare the seven- or eight-hour day of the town worker with the ten and eleven hours of the labourer. Contrast modern-planned houses, built for the 'weekender,' with the derelict cottages, damp and insanitary, into which, in the country, whole families must crowd. There is no lack of incentive. Why, then, are the workers quiet?

Briefly, this: The old independence has been stifled (but not completely choked) by the progress of the industrial revolution, splitting the ranks of the working class, focussing attention on the more immediately important industrial workers; by the imperialistic stage of capitalism; by the combined effect of these two causes—constant and unrelieved depression on the land—and lastly by the present bureaucratic system of distribution of responsibility, from which arises the impossibility of 'fixing the blame.' For instance, labourer to farmer, farmer to Milk Board, Milk Board to Big Business and to Governmental Plans and thence to the vague 'good intentions' of the Government. There is no longer one hated figure to blame when the roof leaks or a man's eye falls on the rotting, wasting land: there is only a Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. And because of all these things, and most of all because of the inattention of political leaders who should be concerned, the country worker has lost touch with the main body of his class; he has slipped back into political ignorance, and Mr. J. Pollen, J.P., who wrote, in January 1831, to the Home Office: 'I confess I view with great regret that they'—the country workers—'have found the mode of combining, which I hoped was confined to the manufacturing classes—' would, in 1936, consider that he had little cause for uneasiness.

I think he would be wrong. The 'mode,' once found, cannot be wholly forgotten. The country workers in 1936 are only needing to have their memories jogged. But the question is, who will do it first? Fascism is a danger Mr. Pollen did not see. A split in the ranks gives Fascism its chance. Not for that reason alone, but for that among others, it is very important and very *urgent* that country conditions should be

realised and understood. The situation in the country at this moment is a dangerous one.

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## CHAPTER 2

### THE LABOURERS

I have chosen Fred Dory as the first labourer to describe to you because he is quite fairly an 'average' country worker. There are others more miserable, more oppressed and rendered by their conditions infinitely more inefficient, but I believe Fred to be representative of the majority. However, do not forget the minority; they are sufficient in number to be dangerous to the success of any plan for betterment.

Fred is now about forty-five; during the war he was in France. He has a wife and five children; Daphne aged twelve, Tom aged ten, Phyllis aged nine, Julia and Nancy, twins, aged five. This family lives in a four-roomed cottage for which the farmer takes 3s. from Fred's wage of 31s. 6d.

To earn his wages, Fred works for forty-eight hours in winter<sup>1</sup> and fifty-three and a half in summer; actually his working day is lengthened by almost an hour, because the farm on which he works lies nearly two miles out of the village.

In winter Fred's day is arranged something like this. He gets up at five-thirty. Goes downstairs with his candle, lays and lights the fire, boils a kettle and carries up a cup of tea to his wife. On the weekly washing-day he fills the copper and lays that fire too. Overnight his wife has prepared his dinner and put it in the bag, and she has left the table spread for his breakfast. This he gets for himself, eating usually large hunks of bread and margarine, washed down with tea.

At a little past six he sets out to walk to the bartons where the farmer meets his men, and Dory does not see his home again until about six-thirty at night. In winter he practically never sees it in daylight.

Work is usually dull and hopeless. In the wet, cold days of late autumn or early winter Dory, who is an expert hedger, may be sent off to a field a mile away (three miles from home), there to lay the boundary hedge, working all day alone, with no likelihood of anyone passing, no help in the event of accidents, and no company but his own pondering thoughts. At noon he'll spread his mackintosh and sit down under the hedge to eat his dinner, half a loaf of bread cut into slabs, with a lump of cheese, and a thermos full of stewed tea. Then he rolls

himself a cigarette and starts to work again. It is rarely warm enough, on that job, to take a full hour's rest.

Hedging, however, is piece-work, paid for at so much per chain, and it is better work than the interminable hoeing; but almost all farm work is lonely, and you are practically cut off from your fellows from the moment of starting until the day is over.

Dory gets home at about six-thirty, if he is lucky. He finds the table spread for tea although the others have finished. His pot of tea has been kept hot on the stove and there is a dish of potatoes, or perhaps a couple of bloaters waiting for him. The small room is overcrowded and at first seems to him intolerably hot. The fire smokes unless a door and window are both kept open, so the draughts soon find him out, almost as soon as his stiff limbs relax. There are, actually, three doors, a window and a very wide, old-fashioned chimney in this particular house—all opening into a small room of about 12 ft. by 14 ft. All the cottages in the village have the same defect; the chimneys smoke unless there is a through draught, which probably accounts for the succession of colds which every family endures throughout the winter.

Fred Dory, having finished tea, sits down by the fire to have a read. Unlike many of the villagers, he takes a London daily (in his case the *Herald*) instead of the local evening paper; it reaches him tattered by the day's wear; Mrs. Dory read it with her dinner; the children squabbled over the pictures when they came back from school. He settles down by the fire to read it. The room is overcrowded and noisy. His wife clatters about, trying to clear up the crockery, heat water to wash the children and so on. The one oil-lamp gives very little light, standing back on the dresser out of reach of the smaller children. There are the sticks to get, and the coal; Fred fetches these and then puts on his coat again and walks up to the inn.

Matters are not much better there. The room is tiny and, just like his own kitchen, hot and draughty. About six other men go there of an evening. It is not often that any of them can afford more than a pint a night. They sit on the hard benches and talk spasmodically; gossip chiefly, or old grievances and old scandals. Nothing new. Current events are very rarely spoken of, politics almost never. After little more than an hour Fred goes home again.

The two younger children are in bed and the other three hang about; no books to read, a few old papers to look at. Mrs. Dory is tired out, but still with work to do. If she doesn't clear up as she goes the room becomes uninhabitable. After a while Daphne and Tom and Phyllis go off to bed as well. In this case, as they are lucky enough to

have three rooms upstairs, Tom sleeps alone, Daphne and Phyllis share the other small room and the twins sleep with their parents.

Upstairs, the children chatter and quarrel until Dory shouts at them and Mrs. Dory backs him up: 'Oh, shut up and let's have a bit of peace, do!'

But peace is not much use. All desire for talk has left the man; he is tired and depressed, as ever. His wife feels inclined to talk a bit; she tells him the story of the day, who she has seen, what the baker said, asks who he met at the pub. But he answers briefly, and they go off to bed. He goes first, while she stays downstairs, cutting bread for his dinner next day and laying the table.

By ten-thirty, at latest, the only lights in the village are candles upstairs.

In the early, dark morning the same round begins again, and that, for twelve months of the year, is that.

The carter, Jack Ensor, who works for a different farmer, lives in a smaller cottage than Dory's. It, too, is thatched and built of clay and rubble. It must be at least three hundred years' old. There are two bedrooms, one just large enough to hold a double bed and a chair, and the other not much larger, although it might be, if it were not for the space taken up by the enormous chimney which juts out quite three feet into the room. The double bed is against this chimney, and a small bed is pushed up in the dark corner the chimney makes. In this room sleep Jack Ensor, his wife, the latest baby and, in the small bed, a girl of eight. Mrs. Ensor is pregnant. The new baby will be born in June, and then the room will hold a cot as well. In the smaller bedroom sleep two girls, aged thirteen and eleven, and a boy aged twelve; another boy, aged fifteen, sleeps in the kitchen where he is very much troubled by the black-beetles, which come out in legions every night.

Downstairs there is this kitchen, slightly smaller than Dory's, and a small slip of a room called, rather grandly, 'the pantry.' In this last, Mrs. Ensor washes up, keeps her china, keeps her food and does all the family washing.

Outside there is a very small coal and wood shed, at the end of the garden, and in that, with no door between, is the privy. There is no window, but some light comes in through the roof, which was tiled but is now falling to pieces. As in all the cottages here, the sanitary arrangements are the most primitive possible: a bucket, with no cover at all, which is emptied only when it must be, and then the contents are tipped into a pit in the garden, and some earth or ashes or old tins and rubbish thrown over the filth.

Mrs. Ensor has had all her children in that cottage; seven of them to date. The eldest girl is out to service—sometimes. She rarely stays more than two months in a place, partly because she works for farmers' wives, who are notoriously hard drivers, and partly because she is too slatternly to be endured. All the children are pretty dirty. It is difficult to know how they could be anything else.

Ensor earns, as carter, 36s. 6d. a week. The eldest boy earns 12s. a week. Occasionally the girl who is 'out' will contribute a shilling or two to the family, but this happens very rarely. The mother takes 10s. of the boy's money, which gives her 46s. 6d. a week, out of which she must pay 3s. rent, 1s. 8d. for the two workers' insurance contributions, 3d. for her husband's slate club, 3d. for the hospital on the 'Contributory Scheme'—a total of 5s. 2d. gone already, and she hasn't started to feed her household of nine, or to warm them or to clothe them—much less to 'put by' anything against the time of her next child's birth.

At the end of this book I shall give one or two 'budgets' as I have received them from labourers' wives. They are worth pondering over. Meanwhile there is one other small family to be described: Joe Talbot, his wife, and their two babies.

Joe is a 'Permit-of-Exemption' man. An accident some years ago has left him slightly crippled; he limps when he walks, tires rather more easily than most men, does a full week's labour, and gets 26s. 3d. by virtue of his permit. Knock off the usual 3s. for rent, 10d. for insurance, 3d. for club money and 3d. for hospital, and you will find that Mrs. Talbot has to 'manage' with 21s. 11d. a week. The two babies are aged eighteen months and two months respectively; both are boys. The elder is a delicate child and has needed constant care. He should have had extra food, should now be getting some sort of cod-liver-oil extract. His mother, too, is delicate, and since the birth of her second son has shown signs of increasing ill-health. They live in a very cold house, set on the side of a hill; in wet weather the water streams down the hillside and the back of the house, banked up as it is directly against the slope of the hill, becomes so damp that every stick of furniture must be moved away or else it becomes, as she says, 'pickled.' There is a hole in the bedroom floor which has had a piece of tin nailed down over it, so that the leg of the bed shall not go through into the kitchen. Ironically enough, this family has a three-bedroomed house, which Mrs. Ensor could well do with, but although the houses all belong to the same estate, they are portioned out under the three different farms, and this particular farmer employs very few men and owns the larger cottages, so Mrs. Talbot lives in this house, and endures the bitter enmity of Mrs. Ensor as a result.



Talbot is a friendly man; hard-working and cheerful. Probably for this reason he is set to do most of the 'odd jobs' (unpaid) for the farmer's wife. He plucks her chickens sometimes, and even sweeps the chimneys—getting up earlier in the morning to get it done before his usual work begins; then she thanks him, and that is that.

Here is Talbot's own list of the work he does: 'Forty-eight hours winter, fifty-three and a half hours summer. 26s. 3d. per week. Work done: with tractor: ploughing, mowing, binding. Otherwise: hedging, pitching out sheep, manure hauling, manure spreading, hoeing, thatch-making, thrashing, haymaking, harvest. Extras: skinning, sweeping chimneys, picking chickens.' (*Note*.—'Skinning' is skinning dead cows or sheep—the latter is properly the work of the shepherd's help, but on this farm, as on many others, that job is put on as an 'extra' for anyone who happens to be handy, although it is certainly not part of a labourer's work.)

You will observe that the Permit of Exemption exempts him from nothing except 6s. 3d. a week.

Talbot would join the union but he cannot afford to pay 4d. a week. He is a well-read man. He and Dory talk together sometimes, and what they have to say is well worth listening to. These two men, and the shepherd, are politically far in advance of the other men in the village; indeed, Dory is directly in the tradition of the local men, his ancestors, who in 1830 joined with the men of the neighbouring village in a demonstration that brought the local landowner tumbling out of his bed in a sweat of anxiety, to parley with them for long enough to allow the militia to come and settle the argument. Proof of this ancestry of Fred Dory's came when he remarked one day (about the very row of cottages in which he is now living) 'What those houses need is a red jacket!'—a remark worth remembering.

The shepherd's account of his labours I shall include among the 'budgets' and notes at the end of the book. His conditions are the same as those I have described—family of four, an ailing wife, himself already stiff with rheumatism, which every year grows worse and more threatening. Cottage next door to Talbot's, and in just such a state. There is no need to go into details; they are much the same in every case. I hope I have made it clear that, while this village is undeniably pretty, there is more to it than that.

The ruling classes are remarkably constant to their ideals; very few of the present gang would alter a word of Sir Frederick Eden's commendation: 'Strudwick continued to work till within seven weeks of the day of his death, and at the age of four score, in 1787, he closed, in peace,

a not inglorious life; for, to the day of his death, he never received a farthing in the way of parochial aid.' Reading this, one realises how disinterested was their reluctance to allow country workers to insure against unemployment. It is a shame to deprive the labourers of the chance of earning such an epitaph.

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## APPENDIX I

### ABRIDGED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## Note

- 1 [VA's note] The winter period is never more than four months in the year.