

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and
Pollinger Limited. Copyright © Evensford Productions Limited, 1942.

The English Village

Good Neighbours. By Walter Rose. (Cambridge. 10s. 6d.)

By H. E. BATES

At one time I should have compared this book with those of its literary forefather, George Sturt; but the publication last year of Sturt's diaries revealed an unsuspected prig behind the wheelwright, a very earnest amateur reading essays in Fabianism by country candlelight. Sturt's diary would have been better buried with Arnold Bennett's mistaken notion, so much in the fashion of literary advisers, that Sturt would make a novelist. Fortunately, Mr. Rose has no one to persuade him to be anything more than himself: a good plain carpenter, and not a cabinet maker, in words, and the result is, in "Good Neighbours," a very honest and agreeable piece of country kitchen furniture.

Mr. Rose was born in 1871—early enough for me to catch the fag-end of the old order—the child of generations of countrymen who had lived in the same village and had no desire to move away. He grew up through the seventies and eighties in the sort of village of whose insularity and charm my generation had the final glimpse just before 1914. The revolution of the railway had already shaken it a little, but not seriously; the final disruption by the internal combustion engine was forty years away. That forty years, in which the English village was for the last time a self-contained unit, its craftsmen and inhabitants interdependent in "the stable life of farmer, labourer, and artisan," has been the subject of many sentimental tears. In Mr. Rose's picture of it there is not much more regret than Mr. Rose the carpenter might feel for the fallen tree. Carpenters cannot afford to be sentimental about trees, and an honest and fatalistic acceptance of the reality and necessity of change runs through the whole of "Good Neighbours."

* * *

To his sketches of country life—hay-making, harvesting, pig-keeping, seed-sowing, markets, village crafts, village schools, village games and village characters—Mr. Rose brings some of his qualities as a carpenter: a straight eye, a feeling for surface, a craftsman's pride in the job, a love of the materials. The chapter on pig-keeping is a small masterpiece. It reveals at its best Mr. Rose's gift of catching, firmly and with precision, the remembrance of things past, and his picture of a young pig vanishing "with a scamper into the dim recesses of the sleeping quarters, from whence to reappear at the doorway with a defiant grunt" opens the door to a whole world. To have been sentimental about that world, to have wanted it back, to have painted it with all the glamour of the dew and the dawn and, above all, to have held it up as a paradise against our own turbulent and blackened age would have been a very natural thing. It speaks much for a man of seventy-one who can say, instead, that past and present must be linked, for "only by so doing can life to-day be truly beautiful."