

George William Lucas, (H.E.'s maternal grandfather).

(1857-1932)

Grandfather Lucas appears in the stories:

Alexander, The Poacher, In View of the Fact That, Day's End, The Fallow Land, The Place Where Shady Lay, The Wedding, Gone Away, Fear, The Watercress Girl, The Pink Cart, Great Uncle Crow, The Plough, The Spriv, The White Pony.

And in the essays and articles:

The Ouse and the Nen, Shoemakers Remembered, Tomorrow: The Country, Why I live in the Country, My Grandfather's Farm, A Midland Portrait, A Rabbit Remembers, God's Little Acres, the introduction to *The Country Heart,* and *Down the River.*

Day's End is dedicated 'To George William Lucas, also a story teller.'

George was born in Kennel Row, Higham Ferrers, the illegitimate son of Ann Lucas. Ann and her sister, Jane, had 5 illegitimate children between them and 'if family gossip is to be accepted there was a succession, on the Lucas side, in Victorian times, of such beauties as to keep squires, doctors and young bloods constantly on the boil'¹. George began his working life at the age of 6 as a farm boy on the Fitzwilliam Estate and later became a highly skilled independent shoe-maker making hand-sewn boots and shoes, as was the custom, at home in a small outbuilding known as the 'shop' (short for 'workshop').

He was a tall, gaunt man, slightly stooping, with very large hands: 'The thumb of my grandfather's left hand was double. He had been born with it and after sixty years it was earth-roughened and scarred and knotted as at the end of an old stick.'² He was also 'a man of advanced and liberal views, constantly energetic in politics, perpetually scornful of and in opposition to all organised religion, a co-founder of the local co-operative society and above all a staunch and passionate Englishman. His face, bronzed by wind and sun, with its fine aquiline nose and pure white hair, had about it an indisputably aristocratic air'.³

¹ The Vanished World

² *The Double Thumb*

³ The Vanished World

By the time H.E. was born George was living with his wife, Priscilla, and unmarried daughter, Florence, in York Rd, Higham; he had given up shoe-making and was renting a few acres of land for a small-holding on the edge of the village. When the small-holding became too much for him he drove a flat, horse-drawn cart through the village, selling fruit and vegetables.

For over 25 years George was a member of Higham's eight-man, horse-drawn, volunteer fire-brigade. When H.E. was five years old he was staying with his grandparents on the night George was called to a fire near Kennel Row, the same row of cottages in which he had been born. The cottages were threatened by fire from a nearby shoe factory and George carried a baby to safety, away from the approaching flames. The baby turned out to be Bates's future wife, Marjorie Cox, and the discovery of the coincidence sealed his friendship with Madge and his approval of their marriage.

Following the death of his wife George was elected as one of the village's twelve Bedesmen, an honour he was immensely proud of despite his dislike of what he called 'the popery' of the ceremonial services he was required to attend.

The relationship with his grandfather was the most significant of H.E.'s life. To George he was the son he never had: *'I grew up in my maternal grandfather's pocket, bonded in a great warm mutual affection, neither of us able in the other's eyes to do the slightest wrong'*.⁴ *'The little farm afforded me the foundation on which all the joys of my childhood, together with all my feeling and love of the countryside, is based'*.⁵ From the highest point in the field his grandfather held him on his shoulders to count the nine spires, *'rhyming their bell sounds and proclaiming excitedly when their weathercocks flashed in the sun'*⁶, and on late summer evenings he wheeled the sleepy boy home in his wheelbarrow. H.E. stayed with his grandparents all through the summer months working on the farm, riding the old white pony to the Green Dragon pub for supplies of beer, and later helping with the fruit and vegetable round. With his grandfather he fished, looked for birds' nests, gathered watercress and played cricket *'up against the wall of the old wooden copper-house, where we boiled*

⁴ The Vanished World

⁵ A Vanished World

⁶ The Ouse and the Nen

chat for pigs,⁷ and in his company he developed a greater independence of thought and political awareness: *'My grandfather was a man of progressive mind, with a deep sympathy for the oppressed and an even deeper sympathy for the land; the shoe-makers were always in the thick of schemes for progressive and social and political reform'*.⁸

George Lucas was a natural born storyteller; his stories, the folklore of his youth and his knowledge of the countryside were all gleaned by H.E. and woven into his work. In 1929 H.E. dedicated his first collection of short stories (*Day's End and Other Stories*) to his grandfather: *To George William Lucas, also a story-teller*. When his grandfather died in 1932 H.E. wrote to a schoolfriend: *'I feel now of course that we never had half enough of him - that another fifty years wouldn't give us the whole richness of his experience'*.

⁷ A Rabbit Remembers

⁸ The Ouse and the Nene