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## FOREWORD

THIS book is a selection of notes which, week by week in *The Spectator*, have made up a column called *Country Life*. They have therefore no narrative sequence, and little seasonal order. Disconnected though they are, however, they are actuated by a purpose, and it may be well to give a short idea of what that purpose is.

Interest in country life, like interest in small birds and small children, is something of a modern phenomenon. Books on gardening and agricultural husbandry began to be published in Europe and England before the end of the fifteenth century, but they were books for the few, their purpose was mainly botanical, and their numbers were, of course, very small indeed when compared with the vast amount of contemporary literature on country life and its many related subjects. Interest in country life as we know it today—an aesthetic, recreative, domestic, economic, practical, botanical or even a sentimental and flippant interest at week-ends—did not exist, and it showed no sign of existing on more than a restricted scale until the eighteenth century, when writers like Arthur Young and William Cobbett explored the countryside and recorded their impressions and comments on what they saw. In those days England was more sparsely populated than it is to-day; outside London there was no town larger than the present-day Northampton; communications were slow, hazardous and expensive, and journeys were therefore undertaken only by the well-to-do and on important business, domestic or political occasions. The state of roads alone must have made the prospect of country travelling, in winter and after heavy rain especially, an appalling prospect. There existed also intolerable conditions of housing and sanitation, though these were by no means confined to the countryside and were possibly even worse in towns, and a general lack of what every week-ender now naturally demands as amenities. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was little articulate interest in country life or that when that interest finally developed it was largely poeticised or sentimentalized and was rarely realistic or objective. Literature, in the form of the drama, novel or poems, was largely responsible for this, and with notable exceptions like Young, Cobbett, Hudson, Hardy, Eden, Jefferies, Thomas, Gilbert White and some parson diarists, writers generally preferred the sentimental view of the village green or left it alone altogether.

All this, both in literature and life, has now changed almost beyond



belief. The impetus of the change may be seen slowly gathering with the progress of the nineteenth century, and reaching its greatest momentum in the period between the two great twentieth-century wars. As mechanical invention has increased, indeed, so interest in country life has increased—until, after the war of 1914–1918, we see it become a national revolution. For this revolution science is, I think, almost entirely responsible. By giving us the railway engine, the bicycle, the motor-car, the telephone, the radio, the concrete road and so revolutionising communication; by giving us antiseptics and by discovering and combating the sources of epidemics and so lessening the terrors of virulent disease and making life safe; by giving us electric light, gas, systems of heat radiation and so making life more comfortable; by applying research to the lives of birds, flowers and animals, and so generating a great new interest in natural phenomena—science has made possible for us, of the twentieth century, the easiest, safest, most comfortable, most accessible, most equitable and most varied kind of country life that has ever been known in England.

Because of this great widening of interest in the countryside a column called *Country Life* becomes a weekly possibility; and it is because I believe that a happy country life is based as much on decent wages, decent sanitation and decent education as on the charm of Springtime and the call of the blackbird, that these notes take the form they have. Among them you will certainly find notes about bird-song, the charm of the seasons and the beauty of flowers; but you will also find demands for better rural housing, better agricultural wages, better farming. You will find notes about gardening and the cuckoo; but you will also find notes about the bigotry and stupidity of rural life, the demand for more responsible rural government. You will find notes about rare wild flowers, but you will also find notes about the decay of the church, the duplicity of politicians. The countryside of England is, perhaps more than any other countryside in the world, man-made. Many of its most beautiful features—notably its woods, hedgerows and green fields—are the results of man-made systems of life, and today its character and beauty are no less man-made and man-sustained. To believe that the countryside will grow and blossom and remain beautiful without the intelligent and active interest of men and women is therefore a great mistake. It is to the opposite of such a belief, and to the kind of countryside and country life that have grown and will grow out of it, that this book is dedicated.

H. E. BATES.

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