

Why I work on the land

Tim Meadows

1964

And he gave it for his opinion that whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground, where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together.

SWIFT

THERE ARE SO MANY APPARENT ANSWERS to the question “Why do you work on the land?” that it took some time for the full implication to sink in. It is really a question of what I want out of life.

My parents were Londoners, but from a very early age I have lived in the country. As I grew older I found myself less and less attracted by the “rat-race”. I determined to do a job I enjoyed for its own sake and not for the money involved. No-one works on the land because of its financial attractions—you don’t get rich on £9 10s. for a 45 hour week.

My grammar school education destined me for a white collar job of some sort—probably teaching. I won a County Major Scholarship but have not yet made use of it. When I was 20 I spent a few months in London, and this finally decided me against that sort of life. I wasn’t made to work from 9 to 5 every day with only a small patch of sky and a few trees to remind me of the countryside. How anyone can work their whole life in a city of dirt and smell, dreaming of retiring to a cottage or smallholding in the country, is past my understanding. The time to live in the country is when you’re young enough to enjoy it. Anyhow my mind was soon made up to abandon a collar-and-tie job for ever so that I could live in the real meaning of the word. For a long time I was a bitter disappointment to my parents. According to everyone I had “wasted my education and thrown away all my chances of ever getting anywhere.” From a materialistic point of view they were probably right. But I was never one to worry about what other people might or might not think.

It did however strike me as queer that, had I had the money, no-one would have queried my buying a farm and living on the land as the farmer and not the farm worker!

Don’t get the idea from this that I am not ambitious. On the contrary I would love to have my own farm, but with land at £250-£300 per acre, the day is pretty far distant. Being unable to buy my own farm has its advantages, however, in that I can learn from the way my boss manages his farm and I hope not to repeat his mistakes.

Most farm workers profess to have the same ambition. "A place of my own" is their dream, but very few actually reach their goal. The trouble is that there are no short cuts, and for men in their position the only way to get a smallholding is by sheer hard work. Son often follows father on the land. The number of men who choose to work on the farm when they have a chance to do something that is usually described as "better" is very low. Outsiders seldom stick the job long. At times the work is highly technical and demands great skill, like driving a combine harvester or operating corn drying and cleaning machinery in the barn. At other times a man must be able to stand long hours of cold wet drudgery like ditching. Looking after animals properly means that a stockman must develop a feeling which tells him intuitively what his animals need, or if there is something wrong. None of these attributes is quickly or easily acquired. Most farming jobs look easy to the layman, but to do them properly takes years of experience. It is no wonder that outsiders usually drift back to the town little wiser after a few brief months.

As singlehanded cowman to a herd of 50 British Friesians, I have found the job most suited to me. Though rigidly tied to milking my charges at six in the morning and four in the afternoon. I can arrange the rest of my day's work to suit myself, which gives me a feeling of independence unknown to other farm workers. I work hard for £15 for a 60-hour week but find it both satisfying and challenging. Satisfying to produce plenty of milk from grass and grassland products as economically as possible, and challenging to keep the cows fit and healthy and producing a calf every autumn.

This is an important point to me, for the growing pressure on agricultural land, makes it increasingly necessary for every available acre to produce as much food as possible. Far too much land is wasted. If we produced more food to make our more self-supporting, more food would be available to feed the growing population of Asia, Africa and South America.

Although my fingers are not particularly green I have always done a bit of gardening as a hobby. It has now become a paying sideline which gives my wife an outside interest too. Instead of letting our half-acre garden become a wilderness like our neighbours, we are developing it into a small nursery, selling vegetables, flowers and plants at the roadside. Now people consider me rather old-fashioned when I say a mother's place is at home, but when a mother goes out to work she cannot give her children the attention they need. My wife can combine her housework with looking after our greenhouses and the garden and selling the produce at the door. She still has time to give our children the love and care they need, and to earn a little pin money into the bargain. Not everybody's cup of tea I agree, but she enjoys it. A friend once said "Isn't it quiet, living here in the country?" Quiet is the last thing my wife calls it when there is a steady stream of callers at the door, and two young children demanding her attention.

Living on a farm also enables the children to learn about birth death quite naturally, without any awkwardness or embarrassment. My boy, who is five, watched us help a cow which was having a bad time with a difficult calf, and was surprised where it came out. He thought it would come out of the belly near the udder. He knows why a bull is different from the cows and why we run him with the herd. This sort of thing makes it easy for us to give honest answers to his questions and for him to understand our replies. A small piece of garden gives a child a lot of pleasure as well as first-hand experience of how seeds grow into plants, and flower and die. It is easy to explain why the seasons change and why the sun does not always shine. They appreciate why we must have rain and a winter with frost and snow. In this way they grow up more aware of the basic things of life than some town children.

There are so many reasons why I live and work where I do that I could never list them all. Many of the little things I should miss terribly if I lived in a town again, like the smell of roses and sweet peas, hay and earth and gunsmoke in the autumn, the taste of rabbit and partridge, field mushrooms and D'Arcy Spice apples, the subtle shades of green in the woods in spring, and of course the birdsong in the evening and early morning.

Although each season, each crop and even each animal is superficially the same, close watch reveals many slight differences which make farming so infinitely fascinating. Far from struggling against nature, the successful farmer works with it as much as possible to provide the best conditions for crops and animals to thrive. Each year brings its problems, and what was right one year could be disastrously wrong another. For the discerning eye there is something new each day, which cannot be said about most jobs; and therein lies the challenge and the appeal of the land.

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