

*Shepherds, Practical and Pastoral,*  
*drawn from Jamres' Rebanks' "The Shepherd's Life: Modern dispatches from an Ancient Landscape", 2015.*

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### *Invitation to Meditation*

I invite you into a time of quiet, for reflection, prayer, or meditation. I invite you to recall some landscape that is precious to you, a landscape that has fed you in some way. Perhaps, in your mind's eye, you look down from an airplane over a prairie patchwork, or across a pasture with horses in it, or a field with baled hay, or into the living waters of some stream, clean and secure within its shaded banks. Perhaps you see some forest primeval—our Carolinian forest, here in Southern Ontario—or a shell midden by a Pacific coastline, metres deep, ten thousand years in the making, legacy of First Nations longhouses. Perhaps you call to mind the lush foliage of a commercial greenhouse, or an allotment garden, or a simple window box. Perhaps you trace the historic paths of a colonial settlement, now a great city, past gnarled and mossy orchards, over ancient streams buried deep beneath some pavement, flowing to lake and sea through secret culverts. I will be remembering the railway up Vancouver Island, years ago, past Shawnigan and Cowichan Station, through flood plains wet with swans. I'll be remembering a sloping field carved out of the bush, stone by stone, root by root, and some shaggy red highland cattle who used to graze there, who would canter down to the fenced track to greet the train—shaggy red sharp horned cattle like the ones I saw last week, by the Longwoods Road, near an ancient battlefield.

I invite you to call to mind some landscape that is dear and precious to your heart. I invite you into a time of quiet, for reflection.

### *Sermon*

Let us consider landscape, a landscape that we or someone we might know, lives in, and perhaps loves, passionately. I take my text this morning from the poet Billy Collins, and his poem, "Horizon"

*Horizon by Billy Collins*

You can use the brush of a Japanese monk  
or a pencil stub from a race track.

As long as you draw the line a third  
the way up from the bottom of the page,

the effect is the same: the world suddenly  
divided into its elemental realms.

A moment ago there was only a piece of paper.  
Now there is earth and sky, sky and sea.

You were sitting alone in a small room.  
Now you are walking into the heat of a vast desert

or standing on the ledge of a winter beach  
watching the light on the water, light in the air.

Collins' poem reminds me that we make choices about where we draw that horizontal line, and our choice affects how we see a landscape. We can see this in art. When I was in Winnipeg, there was a foyer I would walk through, from time to time, and in that foyer was a painting of a prairie farm house; the artist had chosen to draw the line of the horizon just a few inches from the bottom of the painting, and the painting was filled, overflowing, with the big prairie sky.

When I visited the Robert Bateman Gallery last summer, in the Victoria Inner Harbour I noticed how the artist Bateman deliberately shifts his horizon up and down; sometimes the line is drawn just a few inches from the top of the painting; the observer's eye is drawn deep, deep into the waters of a pond, and we sink into the stream with the fish and the diving birds.

Where would you draw your horizon line if you were drawing Essex County?

If one were to go down to Victoria's Inner Harbour, to the old CPR ferry terminal, the one that looks like a Greek or Roman temple, and wander up into the Robert Bateman Gallery there, there are wonders to behold. Until the end of September one would have found there an exhibit titled "The Resilience of the People", which speaks to the geographic culture of the Songhees and Lekwungen people, First Nations of southern Vancouver Island. One placard refers to Victoria's Beacon Hill, and the cultivation of camas bulbs there, for food.

"The Garry Oak Meadows ... were in fact culturally modified, or maintained through intensive management of the land. Straits Salish women would tend to their camas beds through careful weeding, soil aeration, and harvesting. Bulbs would then be pit-roasted or dried for storage and traded with their coastal neighbours.

At the end of harvest season, meadows would often go through a controlled burn, to maintain the open meadow spaces and increase future yields of camas and other edible plants. This transformed the natural landscape itself, eliminating a middle layer of foliage to create what [the colonial governor] Sir James Douglas and others referred to as a "Perfect Eden" of Garry Oak meadows."

I would be remiss if I did not remind you that the edible camas is blue. There is a white camas, also known as the "death camas". Do not eat it.

I would be remiss also if I did not mention that we humans are not the only sculptors of landscape. Perhaps you recall news articles describing how the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone Park impacted biodiversity. Wolves eat elk, who now tend to avoid both the deeper thickets and the more open meadows and valley bottoms of the park. Therefore less aspen and willow trees are grazed down below sustainable levels. Wolves also eat coyotes, who eat beaver and red fox. Therefore coyote numbers are down; beaver and red fox numbers have recovered. Returning a top predator to the ecology has improved biodiversity and sustainability in the Yellowstone eco-system.

Perhaps there is some part of us that would prefer to live upon the sweetness of the air, that we should walk through forests primeval, scarcely touching the ground as we go. But we are

children of the earth, as well as of the stars. Our lives always come at some cost to other life forms round us, animal, vegetable, or mineral. Our choices have consequences. How we choose to look at landscape has consequences. Almost every day there is a news article about choices that impact landscape.

This morning I invite you to look at landscape through the eyes of James Rebanks, a sheep farmer in the Lake District of the north of England. Rebanks has a Twitter feed-- @herdyshepherd1--whereby he keeps about forty thousand folks up to date with news of life on the farm and his herd of Herdwicke sheep. Tough sheep, Herdwickes. Viking sheep. Sheep who can make it through the winter on marginal hillsides.

I really like this book. First, I like the clear voice that comes through—an honest voice, self aware, authentic, truthful, passionate. Second, I like how Rebanks lifts up the interconnections that shape his community, a community he loves fiercely. Third, I like how he lifts up mindfulness about rural culture to a global compass.

Rebanks begins with a frank exposition of his childhood. At school, he was a rotten kid. He made his teachers' lives hell. He loved his family, his farm, and if it wasn't about sheep and farming he felt no need to heed it, in fact he actively despised it. He also noticed that his teachers and others in authority seemed to show little respect for farmers and folk like him. He quit school at the earliest opportunity, at sixteen, and went to work on the farm full time. Glorious. Work—Eat—Sleep. That was his life and his delight. Then a funny thing happened: he began to read.

“Each night I would lie awake on my bed pleased to have the space away from other people, reading like a maniac. When I left school I didn't read much, but very soon I became a devourer of books. I'd often leave the window wide open, so I could tell what the weather was doing, and hear geese passing over or the friendly chatter of the swallows on the telephone lines. Sometimes I'd climb down from the window, with a book in my pocket, and go for a walk across the fields... and listen to the plain call of the curlews.... I'd watch the sun set away to the west. I'd trek home with the orange lights of the farms twinkling across the fields in the dark, and climb back into my room. I'd be

woken the next morning, book still in hand, by jackdaws making their metallic calls as they stole sheep feed from the troughs in the barn below.

One day, I pulled *A Shepherd's Life* by W.H. Hudson from the bookcase.... Until I read this book, I thought books were always about other people, other places, other lives. This book, in all its glory, was about us.... W.H. Hudson turned me into a book obsessive, someone who believed in the written word.”

*Rebanks pp113-15*

The world of James Rebanks had widened. He began to notice that the nerdy citified incomers whom he despised were making a lot more money than he did. He also noticed how very few attractive female humans chose to spend time with an agricultural labourer. Then he met one who did. He went to night school and picked up some A levels, what we would call high school equivalency. He was encouraged to apply for a place at Oxford as a mature student.

Did I mention that he was intelligent, articulate, combative, and stropky with it?

“I'd never been to Oxford, or anywhere like it. It seemed quite ridiculous that I might get in. But the interview went like a dream. I found myself in front of a bunch of bored professors who did a kind of bad-cop-good-cop routine on me. Aged eighteen, I would have wilted, but I was now in my early twenties and it was easy if you weren't really bothered. So, much to the amusement of the other professors, I got into a row with one of them. I like arguing. I'm good at it. When he went too far, and said something a bit silly, I teased him and said he was losing his grip. As I left the room after my time was up, I smiled at them as if to say '...I could do that all day'. They all smiled back. I knew I was in.”

*Rebanks p. 139*

James Rebanks, agricultural labourer, took his place at Oxford. He found it rough going, at first. He saw himself and his kind disrespected there. He noticed and resented issues of class and status. He missed the farm. His girlfriend, later his wife, told him to tough it out and stick to it.

So he did. James Rebanks, agricultural labourer and Oxford scholar took two degrees there, with honours. His degrees were in modern history. His field of study incorporated economics, agriculture, and human geography. And all through his studies he came home to work the farm at every opportunity.

One thing especially I found very touching. Rebanks has hands so deft they can birth a lamb, or slip the pelt off a still born and shift it onto an orphan so the orphaned lamb will smell right and a nursing ewe will accept the orphan and care for it. But he never really learned to write cursive; the thought of sitting down to write a two hour essay examination has him break out into a cold sweat. He learned to do it well enough; but it still shakes him to the core to pick a pencil and write longhand.

Rebanks' special strength is his analytical skill. He can tell us about the killing hard work, the harsh arithmetic, and the soul-swelling beauty, of running a farm on marginal grazing land. He can tell us what it means to the farm and the family in economic terms when the grandfather ages, and dies, when the father gets sick, when the son wants to marry, when a wife or sister or daughter makes a choice that will shape the rest of her life, and the life of her family. He can tell us how you sweat out your day's work, go home and get your dinner, then go back out because your neighbor needs a hand. He can tell us why the yearly agricultural shows are so important. He can tell us how a herd is built up, year after year, how a twitch at an auction can turn a year's harsh toil into shipwreck. He can tell us how to convince an esteemed matriarch that she can trust you enough to sell you the priceless herd she's built up over decades, at a price you both can live with.

Many farmers seek out a second paycheck.. Rebanks' life experience, his pursuit of reputation for good judgement, his commitment to bone crunching labour in a vile climate, plus two degrees from Oxford, combine to form a singular skill set. Accordingly, between lambing and haying seasons, and hedging and ditching, where might such a man look to for a little part time work?

James Rebanks consults with UNESCO—the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—creative intelligence at work in the world. He consults with the UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Programme. His online material describes him as

a “Cultural and Heritage Analyst”. He and his team can help you generate a strategy for a “resilient cultural attraction”.

And who better than a farmer from the Lake District, where perhaps forty thousand people a year visit as tourists, drawn like the poet Wordsworth to a “Romantic” landscape that renews their soul. That “Romantic” landscape is sustained by the hard unsentimental labour of perhaps two or three hundred families. This is where Rebanks came in, at the beginning, as a child, when he simply could not understand why all of those folks from away felt they owned a piece of his landscape. Looking around the wide world as an adult, he believes “we need to open our eyes and see the forgotten people who live in our midst, whose lives are often deeply traditional and rooted in the distant past” (xviii). Tourists walking the fells for a week each summer—what do they know of what makes that landscape possible? No farmer, no farm. No sheepdog, no sheep. No backbreaking days to drain the fields, and the fields go back to bog.

It bothered Rebanks that the poets and tourists could see the land but they could not seem to see the people that made the landscape sustainable over thousands of years. In time, Rebanks came to understand that the romantics with their sense of a broader ownership of iconic landscapes had also established the notion of “a sort of national property, in which every [person] has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy”, and that this had led to the very principles of conservation for “[e]very protected landscape on earth, every Nation Trust property, every National Park, and every UNESCO World Heritage Site”, including the conservation laws that made it possible for him to keep farming on his very own patch of Lake District hill side (xv).

In conclusion, a scrappy kid grew up to love his farm and his hillside and his tough Herdwick sheep. And he came to see a larger pattern, how human culture can shape the very earth, can create something that could be interesting and beautiful to feed a city-dweller’s soul and imagination, as well as their belly, something real and sustainable.

I invite you to think about that interface between culture, agriculture, economics, tourism, and sustainability. In the face of concern about climate change, environmental degradation, and challenges to the food chain, I invite you to mindfulness. Did you ever visit a farm when you were a kid in school? Can those of us who are not farmers look at the countryside and see it in the fullness of its economic realities and possibilities? Can we, as tourists invested in the physical and spiritual gifts of a landscape, make an effort to be literally “grounded” in humility, in gratitude, as we walk ourselves into the scene?

What would that look like? I would imagine you have likely given that some thought. For a start, it would mean closing gates behind you, so animals don’t stray, and reading posted signs, and honouring them. No hunting means no hunting. No dumping trash means no dumping trash. If you do go hunting, as my cousin does, know what you’re about. If you keep a dog, and take your dog with you out into the landscape, keep your dog clear of livestock, preferably on a leash. One could go to an agricultural fair. One could begin by reading James Rebanks’ book, “The Shepherd’s Life”. I recommend it. One could always begin by taking a walk, mindfully. May you walk in beauty.

I close with Rebanks’ own words:

“There is no beginning, and there is no end. The sun rises, and falls, each day, and the seasons come and go. The days, months and years alternate through sunshine, rain, hail, wind, snow and frost. The leaves fall each autumn and burst forth again each spring. The earth spins through the vastness of space. The grass comes and goes with the warmth of the sun. The farms and the flocks endure, bigger than the life of a single person. We are born, live our working lives and die, passing like the oak leaves that blow across our land in the winter. We are each a tiny part of something enduring, something that feels solid, real and true. Our farming way of life has roots deeper than five thousand years into the soil of this landscape.”

*Rebanks p. 2*



*Bibliography.*

James Rebanks, *“The Shepherd’s Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape”*, 2015. Rebanks tweets at Twitterfeed @herdyshepherd1. The internet will connect the reader to many reviews of Rebanks’ book, interviews, etc, as well some work published through UNESCO.

Numerous internet articles including Wikipedia describe the shift in biodiversity that followed the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park.

Anything by cultural anthropologist Jared Diamond.

Helen Humphreys, “The River”, 2015.

*With thanks to the Robert Bateman Gallery staff and exhibit curators, especially history student and curatorial assistant Kathryn McAllister. Several informative books on cultural geography will be found there in the reading lounge.*

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