

The Last Georgic, or James Grahame's Revision of Eighteenth-Century Rural Labour

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Left behind in the field of Scottish literary history is the last poem in English that names itself a 'georgic'. Before Scotsman James Grahame published his 3100-plus line poem *British Georgics* in 1809, English and Scottish poets' imitations of Virgil's *Georgics* had dominated the British literary landscape for over a century with their poetry's ability to define the British empire through descriptions of the nation's agriculture. The story of georgic poetry is always the story of the land; how the poet portrays rural labourers and the effect of their produce on the world tells us how a culture constructs ideas of nationhood. Without James Grahame's contribution to this story, British georgic histories usually begin with John Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* in 1697 and extend through adaptations of Virgil in John Philip's *Cyder*, Christopher Smart's *The Hop-Garden*, John Dyer's *The Fleece*, and often conclude with James Grainger's *The Sugar-Cane* in 1764, so that, thanks to the mighty apple, hop, wool and sugar cane, Britain stands as a conqueror of nature and nations, fed by agricultural technology.¹ However, because Francis Jeffrey's article in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1810 was the last publication devoted to *British Georgics*, it is fair to say that Grahame's poem has been largely forgotten. By forgetting *British Georgics*, we lose an understanding of poetry's power in the late nineteenth-century to form notions of rural labour that rearticulates 'Britain' as a matrix of local, even peculiarly Scottish, customs.

Before Grahame, georgics tended to celebrate the expansive reach of the British farm, where not only produce but systems of commercial behavior that begin locally propagate globally, as the minute becomes the cosmic. This movement occurs throughout an earlier Scottish poem to which *British Georgics* repeatedly and explicitly invites comparison, James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-1748). Thomson, for example, suddenly dilates a 'simple scene' of sheep shearing in *The Seasons*' 'Summer' into his vision of the rise of Britannia's 'solid grandeur' as she 'commands / The exalted stores of every brighter clime' with the 'dreadful thunder' of her wool-laden ships that ride 'o'er the waves sublime' ('Summer' 423-29). This motion from unit to universal is a controlling metaphoric process in Thomson; the 'secret all-invading power' of nature contained in a crystal of frost in 'Winter' is a 'potent energy, unseen' that seizes rivers from shore to shore so that people the world over, all beneath one 'starry glitter, [that] glows from pole to pole,' may skate about on the Rhine, or frolic in Russia and Scandinavia (Winter 715, 717, 765-777, 741). One may see, then, how earlier eighteenth-century georgic imagines a structural pattern from the atomic level, infinitely outward.

British Georgics is an important cultural statement² because it exactly reverses this course; specific early nineteenth-century global exigencies—the war with France, the

whims of the market, and governmental enclosures—combine to pressure rural life and labour from the outside-in. The poet responds by collapsing cultivation and culture as he revises British rural labour as an amalgam of individuated localities and customs. In this, the final named georgic, what is truly national is truly local.

The strongest external, historical force that shapes this poem is the land enclosure movement, a phenomenon that gained momentum in the last three decades of the eighteenth-century, after the earlier, more celebratory georgic fell out of fashion. The effect of enclosures led to a new kind of writing about the land, the sort that we find in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* in 1770. What late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century poets reacted to when they wrote about the land was the way that Britain was reshaped in just a few decades. Parliamentary acts of land enclosure—where the open field system of common pastures, with its bare fallows and inefficient manuring (Roberts 188), were transformed into a network of single farmsteads allotted to individual freeholders or tenants—sundered a multitude of landless labourers from rural societies, as well as from their only means of income. Since not all farmers in the former open field system could have their claims satisfied, some were given small, odd-shaped corners of larger fields, perhaps separated at opposite ends of the parish, while others were granted hundreds of acres more than they could manage (Turner: 17). Exacerbating this, Parliamentary enclosures explicitly allowed enclosures without the consent of all the proprietors (Yelling: 8).

The depth, width and suddenness of this upheaval can be quantified. In the first six decades of the eighteenth-century only 313,000 acres were enclosed, but in the century's remaining four decades, there was a ten-fold increase in the rate of enclosure, affecting eventually seven million acres or 20% of the total area of England—and of course, as a percentage of the country's arable land, the effect was overwhelming. For example, in Berkshire and Cambridgeshire, 94% and 85%, respectively, of the farm land was affected (Turner: 24). In all, over 5200 Parliamentary acts were spread over 300 years, but 3800 of these acts were passed from 1750 to 1820 (*op.cit.*: 32), the vast majority of which occurred during the Napoleonic wars (*op.cit.*: 93).

Worse yet, the country suffered nine bad harvests in the 19 years from 1794-1812 (*op.cit.*: 103). Thus, by the time that Grahame drafted *British Georgics*, wartime conscriptions that took many hands from the plough, and agricultural prices which could not keep pace with a general inflation that was at times severe—cutting into the average worker's income by as much as 20% per year (Mingay: 114), pushing rents up by 90-100% since the beginning of the war (*op.cit.*: 46)—combined with enclosures to force irrevocable changes upon tenant farmers and smaller landowners. Technological improvements that were instituted to boost productivity in the face of these pressures 'steadily and at times ruthlessly brok[e] down' the 'social relations which stood in the way of...modernization' (*op.cit.*: 60). That is exactly where James Grahame's project begins: it chronicles the breakdown of these local social relations.

He asks those who 'plough a wide domain,'—with the verb 'to plough' clearly implying ownership and not manual labour:

Are fields alone
Worthy the culture of a fostering state?
What is a country rich in waving grain,

In sweeping herds and flocks, barren of men,
 Or, fruitful of a race degenerate, sunk
 In gloomy ignorance, without a ray
 Of useful, or of pleasing lore, to cheer
 The listless hours, when labour folds his arms? (416-23)

The nation's wealth is figured organically as being nurtured by the state, where 'state' infers a broader sense than merely the political, since throughout the poem, the speaker addresses what would then be called 'men of state', the landed proprietors and regional lords. They are to act as husbandmen of the community, for even though the countryside was being depopulated, they are implored to see that the land is not 'barren of men', nor that labourers, who are likened to agricultural produce, do not bear the fruit of ignorance. Those who grow and that which is grown compose a 'field of life', a unifying metaphor that asserts the interdependency of culture and cultivation. The Preface to the poem, therefore, argues that 'the welfare of the country depends in great measure on preserving the cultivators of the soil in that relative state of respectability, comfort, and consequence, which they have hitherto held, but which the fashionable system of agriculture has an evident tendency to destroy' (ii). '[F]estivals, holidays, customary sports, and every institution which adds an hour of importance, or of harmless enjoyment, to the poor man's heart, ' he contends, 'ought to be religiously observed' (ii). If not, then 'Trade's encroaching power.../ Will drive each older custom from the land, / Will drive each generous passion from the breast' (1184-86).

Wishing to seal off rural labour from socioeconomic incursions, Grahame establishes a pattern of communal circularity in a contrast between his own poetic text and his poem's first epigraph, a passage from Thomson's 'Winter'. *The Seasons'* speaker decries the 'thoughtless eye' that sees winter as only ruin and does not feel the natural 'renovating force' that 'Draws in abundant vegetable soul' through the 'frost concocted glebe' ('Winter' 705-707). Rather than a whole person grounded in a community, one finds an abstraction, an 'eye' that beholds the wintry field, that ought to perceive a gathering of invisible elements that ready the earth for productivity—a geometrically linear image. The first picture in *British Georgics*, though, is of a New Year's Day tradition: the initial neighbour to greet a cottage is called the 'First-Foot,' a significant synecdochical distinction from Thomson's 'eye.' The visitor conveys the 'steaming flaggon, borne from house to house, [which] elates the poor man's heart, / And makes him feel that life has still its joys' (37-39). The hot beverage circulates from one household to the next, labourers make the social rounds, and, in comparison to Thomson, the social supplants nature as an unseen, binding force. Natural conviviality is the basis for welfare and prosperity, which come to every house that receives the het-pint.

Grahame then widens the metaphor of social circularity to the land itself. After the flaggon makes the rounds, the voice of a wizened farmer instructs the reader on how to rotate properly one's crops. Considering that enclosures were causing such great instability, it is surprising to find crop rotation, the quintessential agricultural strategy on the enclosed farm where turnips, clover and other fodder crops are grown on otherwise fallow ground, advocated through the character of a rural sage. However, the physically horizontal circularity of crop rotation at once becomes a kind of vertical circularity when one reads the endnote appended to the farmer's instruction, a three-and-a-half page

excerpt that Grahame supplies from Lord Kame's *The Gentleman Farmer*. The source of the poem's staged folkloric sagacity is an aristocrat's published scientific advice. When placed into the mouth of a rural worker who addresses the poem's readers—specified in the Preface as the landowning class—one finds a vertical circularity of discourse. Furthermore, the precepts espoused by the elderly farmer, he claims, have made the labour he loves like rest to him. Modern agricultural techniques on the enclosed farm apparently turn *negotium* into *otium*. One way that this is obtained is through the construction and maintenance of hedgerows, another fixture of enclosure, which transmutes 'bleak and shivering cold to genial warmth' (79). Warmth is found inside the circle of rural labour, much like the cottage to which a lost shepherd in the poem's first book, 'January', returns—a direct and intentional contrast to James Thomson's shepherd in 'Winter', who is also lost but is overcome by a brutal nature that freezes his internal organs. Again, Thomson gives the reader linearity—his shepherd never returns—and Grahame renders a society that musters an insular completeness as a defense to a threatening world.

Beyond the perimeter of Grahame's farm, vermin seek to attack, an echo from Virgil's *Georgics* where barns must be sealed up and every part explored (239). And yet, the poet subtly acknowledges that his bucolic peace has already been broken when he notes that the sound of the single flail in the threshing field reminds him that 'peace is not within our gates' (125-28); the thresher has been conscripted and sent to battle. This is not to say, though, that the rupture of an enclosed system always garners protest, for even as he praises the attributes of agricultural improvements, he also records the changes to the countryside with an unmistakable nostalgia:

By such resources so applied, I've seen,
As if it were, a new creation smile;
Have seen the clover, red and white, supplant
The purple heath-bell; rustling ears succeed
The dreary stillness of the lurid moor;
The gluttoned heifer lowing for the pail,
Where starving sheep picked up their scanty fare;
The sheltering hawthorn blossom, where the furze
Its rugged aspect reared; and I have heard,
Where melancholy plovers hovering screamed,
The partridge-call, at gloamin's lovely hour,
Far o'er the ridges break the tranquil hush;
And morning-larks ascend with songs of joy,
Where erst the whinchat chirped from stone to stone. (574-87)

The red and white clover, a staple crop of the enclosed farm, has displaced the purple heath-bell, and the morning-lark's song comes at the expense of the whinchat that once 'chirped from stone to stone,' leaving the assonance of that phrase a hollow echo of its voice. In the ideology of improvement, 'rustling' may be preferred to 'dreary stillness', and 'gluttoned heifers' over 'starving sheep', but a poignancy is registered in the absence of the rugged furze and the melancholy plover. Far from the waste and emptiness with which pre-enclosed land is usually described in, for instance, Arthur Young's *Annals of*

Agriculture, Grahame hints at a sorrow for the supplanted wilderness, imparting an emotional ambivalence. When enclosures '[w]ere rare,[...]every hill-side, every lea, / And broomy bank, was vocal with the notes / Of rustic pipe, or rudely chaunted rhymes' (1167-69). Bogs have been drained into fields leaving a 'joyless stubble ridge' where 'no more the heath-fowl her nestling brood fosters' (1236-41). The word consistently used to describe the absented foliage, wildlife and human labourers is 'exile'. Grahame's contradictory position may be thus: 'happy the enclosed farmer, but sad the farmer displaced by enclosure.'

The site of rural labour, this land that contains both gain and loss, producing more but experiencing its people's exile, requires a different kind of perceptive process than previous georgic writing. The eye is a dominant sensory organ in eighteenth-century poetry with its intimate connection to the mind's operation, whereas Grahame's travellers through the landscape are often blind. In the same breath that the poet describes the 'balmy odour' of flowery fields that grow beside acres of 'bearded grain' in 'June' (1392), a traveler passes through who is '[p]erhaps some veteran, whom Egyptian sands / Have reft of sight,' in the war, and wishes to 'behold these blooms, / Which now recal his father's little field' (1397-1404). Indeed, nostalgia may be Grahame's primary means of understanding an invading world beyond the limits of the Scottish farm. In a recent article, Kirsten Daly reads Grahame's *The Sabbath* (which he published five years before *British Georgics*) as imagining a Britain that has become a defensive fortress under attack by the French. Scotland, and I would add, the Scottish enclosed farm, has become, as Daly says, 'a citadel within a corrupt and menacing world'. Nostalgia enables the realization that, according to Daly, 'if the community is broken up, the land will be vulnerable to attack' (Daly: 33, 34).

To the poet's credit, nostalgia can help foreigners, as well, by binding life's wounds. At the end of 'February', after instructing the reader where to plant willows, he digresses to list the kinds of work that those unfit for farm labour can perform, such as weaving willows into wicker (690). One of these weavers is a blind French prisoner of war, whose 'wicker-work...almost seemed / To him a sort of play' (710). He, too, was a rural labourer on the 'willowy banks of Loire', and whose forced enlistment tears him from wife and child, causing him to wish 'For liberty and home, [to]...stretch [him]self and die upon [his wife's] grave' (730-31). Longing for home, working with one's hands, and sympathetically reacting to such a sentimental tale are all intended not only to heal a breach in the rural community, but also to extend the circle across national borders.

Still, as neatly tied as some moments appear in *British Georgics*, the work in its entirety, with its 100-plus pages of prosaic endnotes, begs the question of how one can talk poetically about rural labour, and further, how one can hope to unify the ideas of English and Scottish rural custom into a credible notion of the British nation. Grahame clearly struggles with this dilemma in his Preface:

[T]he modes of cultivation which I recommend are not, strictly speaking, *local*. That the scenery and manners *are local*, or rather *national*, is true; but the rules of agricultural improvement which I have inculcated, whether by description [in the poem] or by direct precept [in the endnotes], are equally suitable to both divisions of the island....With respect to the notes, which compose the concluding part

of this volume, I can safely say, that, in adding them, I have been induced, by a firm conviction that they would form a useful supplement to the poetical part of the work. In a composition partly didactic, it is often impossible to reconcile minuteness with poetry...When to these considerations is added this, - that allusions to manners and customs are, of all others, those which most generally require illustration, and that the manners and customs, which are the subjects either of allusion or description of the following poem, are many of them peculiar to one only of the united kingdoms, I trust that, in the judgment of every candid reader, I shall be acquitted of having practiced the unworthy device of increasing the bulk without adding to the value of my work. (v, vii-viii)

Francis Jeffrey disagreed. In his 1810 review, he found the poem fundamentally split between the 'legible' and the 'illegible', between the poetry and the prose explanations of customs and agricultural didactics. With the often tedious instruction on planting beans, selecting soil, fertilizing, or establishing hedgerows being simply unreadable for Jeffrey, the value of the work is in the 'reliable, true descriptions that come from personal, original feelings or sentiments'. As he strikes a playfully chauvinistic pose, Jeffrey ignores Grahame's effort to bring together the schism of the United Kingdom, and instead intones: '[T]he rustics of Scotland are a far more interesting race, and far fitter subjects for poetry than their brethren of the same condition in the South...To say all in a word, they are far less *brutish* than the great body of the English peasantry' (Jeffrey: 213, 216).

But the problem I find is that an abnegation of the worth of didactics in this poem denies the georgic's unique ability to define the nation out of disparate parts. Certainly, as L. P. Wilkinson reminds us in his introduction to Virgil's *Georgics*, the *Georgics* becomes the 'great poem of united Italy' through its shoring up of internal disunities—both politically and within its own textual apparatus (Wilkinson: 21). Grahame attempts the same mantle in naming his poem *British Georgics*. His speaking only of the Scottish countryside as a series of ethnic localities with traits that can be nationalized is then very much to the point.

Any time the georgic is read, there is always that problem of excess, those details and digressions that do not fit cleanly into what should be a purposeful scheme. Dr Johnson's faulting of Thomson's *The Seasons* for a 'want of method' (Kroeber: 96) is a case in point. In at least one moment, however, I suggest that Grahame's struggle to reconcile the minute with the poetic—and the poetic seems to signify for him and Jeffrey, the universal—he achieves a sophisticated success. In the poem's eighth book, 'August', he supplies what Jeffrey, and perhaps we too, might call tedious advice on how to redirect the path of a river in order to fertilize a field with its alluvial overflow of mud. The 'rich deposit' of nourishing, excessive soil will 'swell the compost pile' (2076) to give the farmer a plentiful store to fortify his crops. The endnote for this line credits the first book of Virgil's *Georgics*, where the farmer is advised to guide the river away from the corn so that the crop will not be overwhelmed. Grahame then quotes Dryden's translation that counsels the labourer to 'drain the standing waters, when they yield / Too large a beverage to the drunken field' (1.170). However, when Grahame follows these

selections with an excerpt from the 'Agriculture' entry in the Edinburgh Encyclopedia that describes how to utilize the 'fertilizing deposit which almost every overflowing river leaves,' he seizes the contemporary, prose literature of improvement from the Encyclopedia and marries it to the georgic poem for the purpose of making a contrast; he does not want to redirect the water away from his fields as in Virgil and Dryden, but he shows how to enrich the unseen and unused potential of the land. Excess is an important supplement that must not run off unused. In georgic poetry, then, as well as in husbandry, there is more than one can use at one time.

Attention to these notes permits an analysis of Grahame's careful characterization of rural life and labour in 1809. Perhaps the quintessential Virgilian georgic metaphor appropriated by Grahame is the care of bees, for they represent (in Dryden's translation) 'embattled squadrons, and adventurous kings - / A mighty pomp, though made of little things' (4.4-5). In *Georgics* IV, when the bees fly away to find 'sweet waters and leafy coverts', the farmer should scatter 'the scents of bruised balm, honeywort,' and 'raise a tinkling sound, and shake the Mighty Mother's cymbals round about,' a reference to the worship of Cybele that was accompanied by the clash of cymbals. But when the bees fly away in *British Georgics*, substituted for the cymbals are the village church bells on Sunday, perhaps a reference to his own poem *The Sabbath* as the exiles depart Scotland. In Virgil, the scents and cymbals can coax the bees' return. In Grahame, nothing can. The bees of *British Georgics* are called '[t]he emigrating tribe' that has 'gone past hope; / Nor, after anxious search o'er hill and dale, / Does e'er the slumberous owner hear again / Their welcome hum' (1731-34). They represent a local community that, instead of a Virgilian warring between states, gathered in a 'reeling dance' on 'these honied morns' before the crowded porch of their hive, evoking the images elsewhere in the poem of Highland dances. It is significant, then, that even the church bells ringing as they take wing cannot keep the bees at home. They vacate the country, leaving the legacy of the Virgilian georgic behind, just as the georgic genre itself has been left as a literary memory.

NOTES

¹ Dates of publication for these texts: Dryden's translation of *Virgil's Georgics*, 1697; John Philip's *Cyder*, 1708; Christopher Smart's *The Hop-Garden*, 1752; John Dyer's *The Fleece*, 1757; James Grainger's *The Sugar-Cane*, 1764. Anthony Low's *The Georgic Revolution* gives a detailed history of the georgic up to the eighteenth-century, with a broad discussion of canonical georgic text after Dryden. John Chalker's *The English Georgic* is the last monograph devoted to an eighteenth-century georgic history. Kurt Heinzelman brackets traditional eighteenth-century georgic from 1697 to 1764 (Grainger) or 1767 (Richard Jago's *Edge Hill*) in 'Roman Georgic in the Georgian Age: A Theory of Romantic Genre'.

² As a text, it is difficult to assert the strength of the poem's contemporaneous influence, since it was published in only four editions from 1809 to 1812 before its final printing in 1821. The British Library's printed catalogue shows that the first edition was published by Ballantyne in Edinburgh in 1809 and a second edition in 1812. However, I have

studied an 1811 Edinburgh edition as well (located at Johns Hopkins University). In 1821 another copy was printed with a new title page: *Rural poem illustrative of the husbandry, scenery and manners of Scotland, or British Georgics*.

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