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# All Writings Great and Small

## Reading James Herriot's Stories as Travel Literature

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The world of James Herriot has expanded far beyond its British beginnings. The stories of this Yorkshire veterinarian and his work in the fictitious town of Darrowby, have reached around the globe. His works have been translated into dozens of languages and read in numerous countries. By 1991 over 50 million copies of his books had been sold while two films and a television series had also been produced (Brunsdale 1). This popularity is all the more impressive for an author who began writing at the age of fifty and wrote stories primarily about animals.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his popularity, there has been little critical examination of Herriot's literary corpus. With a handful of exceptions, the Academy has largely turned a blind eye to his efforts. Part of the reason is likely a common misconception that Herriot's work should be considered children's literature. But before we consign Herriot's work to the children's section, we should first consider an alternative genre. This essay suggests that we reread this popular author and explore the possibility that when we encounter the stories of life in the Yorkshire dales, we are in fact, encountering an important work of travel literature. Following a brief examination of his life, this essay focuses on themes in Herriot's books that share much in common with other works of travel writing.

## Biography

James Herriot is the pseudonym for James Alfred (Alf) Wight. The distinction between Alf Wight and James Herriot is difficult to draw. Wight's personal autobiography and fictionalized observations all too often converge. In his biography of his father, Jim Wight even uses James Herriot and Alf Wight almost interchangeably (Wight, 1). Wight was born on 3 October 1916 in Sunderland, England. Three weeks after his birth his family moved to Glasgow and Wight was raised in that largest city in Scotland. In high school, after listening to a presentation by the principal of the Glasgow Veterinary College, Wight was convinced that veterinary practice would be his vocation. Upon graduation from high school, Wight was accepted at the Glasgow Veterinary College (Wight, 45).

Wight completed his veterinary training in 1938, during the height of the depression, and was fortunate to get a job in the practice of Donald Sinclair (the character Siegfried Farnon in his subsequent books) in the town of Thirsk, an agricultural community with a population around a few thousand. In his fictionalized telling of these stories, Wight substituted the name Darrowby for Thirsk (Wight, 94). It is located in the heart of the Yorkshire dales in northern England. Wight immediately grew to enjoy the scenic beauty and the delightful characters who he encountered in his day to day activities.

In 1941 Wight married Joan Danbury (Helen Alderson) and became a partner in Sinclair's practice (Wight, 128). Two years later, while Joan was pregnant with their first child, Wight volunteered for the Royal Air Force and was called up for training. His parent's home in Glasgow had been bombed during a Luftwaffe attack and this motivated Wight to join. Wight was discharged for health reasons from the R.A.F. in 1945 (Wight, 144-53). From 1950 to 1966 he remained working as a veterinarian in the dales except for two brief occasions when he traveled with animals overseas, once to the U.S.S.R. in 1961 and to Istanbul, Turkey in 1963.

In 1966, at the age of 50, Wight began writing down his experiences as a country veterinarian and tried unsuccessfully to find a publisher for four years (Wight, 245). Finally in 1970 his first book of recollections was published under the title of *If Only They Could Talk*, followed two years later by *It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet*.

That same year, in 1972 both books were combined and published in the United States with the title *All Creatures Great and Small* (*ACGS*).

The success of *All Creatures Great and Small* in the United States was an enormous surprise to Wight and his publisher. Wight expected his works to carry only a mild interest among those who had some knowledge of the dales. But perhaps unconsciously, Wight succeeded in expressing a theme common to world literature. Readers were instantly taken with the idea of the young, clumsy vet who grows into an accomplished, caring professional. As Michael Rossi has demonstrated, *All Creatures Great and Small* is a coming of age story (Rossi 32).

In *ACGS*, Herriot explains his initial attraction to animal work and his first encounter with the Yorkshire dales. He is a newly minted veterinary surgeon, fresh out of school, full of resolve and ready to change animal work. But as he begins his rounds, Herriot discovers that the theoretical book knowledge of his veterinary school has not always adequately prepared him for the daily encounters that he has in Yorkshire. *All Creatures Great and Small* covers the variety of experiences that beset young Herriot in his first few years, from 1938 to early 1941.

As *All Creatures Great and Small* progresses, Herriot moves through an initial period of self-doubt to some measure of confidence in his own abilities. By the end of the book he has developed as a veterinarian, but more importantly as a person. This change is brought about in him by his environment, and by people. Herriot is particularly impressed by the farmers of the dales themselves. Rossi suggests that the change in Herriot results from "the people, places, and situations he encounters. Herriot speaks of being affected by them and shares first impressions and conclusions about them." (Rossi 33).

Herriot begins his job after arriving in the 1930's, a key turning point for the traditional life in these farming communities. It was a time when some of the older traditions are changing, veterinarians are shifting from traditional animals like horses and cows to small animal care. As Herriot later wrote

Probably the most dramatic occurrence in the history of veterinary practice was the disappearance of the draught horse. It is an almost incredible fact that this glory and mainstay of the profes-

sion just melted quietly away within a few years. And I was one of those who were there to see it happen.

> When I first came to Darrowby the tractor had already begun to take over, but tradition dies hard in the agricultural world and there were still a lot of horses around. Armed with my firing iron and box of blister I plunged determinedly into what had always been the surging mainstream of veterinary life.
> And now, in less than three years the stream had dwindled, not exactly to a trickle but certainly to the stage where the final dry-up was in sight. (*ATBB,* 160)

In addition to the disappearance of the draft horse, new drugs and treatment methods were just beginning to come on the scene to displace traditional methods of animal care.

*ACGS* proceeds at an episodic pace. With few exceptions, the characters encountered only exist in that individual chapter. Most chapters are self contained units, completing an encounter within the context of one chapter. The effect is for the reader to accompany young Herriot on his visits, making the rounds with him in his antiquated car along the back roads of the dales. There are four important exceptions that not only play an important role in this book, but in the succeeding books as well.

The four main characters are James Herriot, Siegfried Farnon, Tristan Farnon, and Helen Alderson. The stories are all told from the first person perspective, and the reader's sympathies lie with young Herriot. The country veterinarian presents himself as an empathetic, caring individual who treats both people and animals with respect and compassion. His flaws are few, and relatively harmless. Mostly he is inexperienced and somewhat clumsy. He has the ability, which hindsight so often provides, of seeing the humor in various awkward situations. Herriot changes throughout the book as he matures and gains much greater confidence in himself and in his profession.

Siegfried and Tristan Farnon are brothers who work with Herriot. Siegfried is Herriot's employer and has worked as a veterinary for years. Siegfried is more of a comrade in arms than a boss. He hires Herriot at a time when unemployment was high and he con-

sistently pays him more than market value. Siegfried demonstrates compassion for and support for Herriot on the young veterinarian's very first case. Herriot orders the destruction of a valuable, but diseased, horse and the manager of the farm is outraged. Herriot puts the horse down and a postmortem confirms his diagnosis.

Siegfried possesses a complex, though kind, personality. He excels at behaving inconsistently, though he does not himself see that inconsistency. His obliviousness to his own actions delights the reader, who is all too familiar with the reality of his behavior.

We are introduced to a new element of Siegfried's behavior when his brother Tristan arrives in chapter six of *ACGS*. Tristan is Siegfried's younger brother and is attending, but not yet passing, veterinary school. Tristan also brings out the most boisterous behavior of his brother. Tristan is clever, but lazy—a combination that drives his brother Siegfried into fits of madness. In fact, Tristan's cleverness is expressed most explicitly through his laziness. Most of the narratives that take place at the center of the veterinary practice, called Skeldale House, involve these three interacting with one another.

The fourth major character is Helen Alderson. She is the attractive daughter of a local farmer and the object of affection for Herriot. Her decision to wear slacks in a day when it was still unconventional suggests her independent nature. Much of James and Helen's courtship is comprised of foolish actions expressed by Herriot followed by a great deal of grace demonstrated by Helen.

Helen appears to be unattainable for Herriot. The young veterinarian must overcome a series of obstacles (including competitive suitors and his own boorish mistakes) in order to win Helen's heart. It is only after both Tristan and Siegfried encourage Herriot to his attempts at courtship that the hero wins the lady's heart. *All Creatures Great and Small* concludes with the description of their marriage. The final chapter of the work describes how their honeymoon was spent testing cows for tuberculosis.

Over the next twenty years Wight published over a dozen more books narrating the life of Herriot and his various encounters with the denizens of the dales. These works carried forward the story of Heerriot through his time with the Royal Air Force in World War II and into various veteran trips to the USSR and Turkey. In 1995 Alfred Wight died of cancer in his home at Thirlby, where he had moved after fifty years of veterinary work in Thirsk.

## Reading Herriot as a Travel Writer

There are at least two reasons why Wight's writings have not been adequately addressed as travel literature. The primary obstacle in reading these texts as travel literature is likely because they have traditionally been considered either children or animal stories. The Academy has not often deemed stories about children and pigs as worthy of critical investigation.

But these genres need not be mutually exclusive. A characteristic of exceptional literature is that it transgresses traditional formal boundaries. Reading Herriot's work as children's literature does not disqualify it from other classifications as well. It could be travel literature that children could still comprehend. *Huckleberry Finn* might serve as an important analogue of travel literature that is of interest to a younger audience.

But this simple classification of Herriot as a children's writer is incomplete. First, there are many adult themes present in the works of Herriot, from personal situations like courting, marital difficulty, and drunkenness to societal issues like euthanasia and the difficulties of war. Additionally, the language of the Yorkshire farmer was often a bit rough for children. As often as a character refers to an animal as an "Awd bugger!" or utters the expletive "Bloody 'ell!" it is problematic to conceive of these books exclusively as children's stories. The assignation of these stories to children's literature might be more a result of marketing strategies than based on the actual content of these works. Originally, *If Only They Could Talk* had a boy holding a horse's reins on the cover and that led many bookstores to put it in juvenile literature. (Wight 363).

The same is true of their designation as "animal stories." While they certainly contain animals, these creatures inhabit a background that is larger than themselves. Herriot spends more time describing the people and the landscape than he does the animals. When he does lovingly describe animals, it is almost always in the context of their owners. For example, he develops theories about the old rule that the larger the home, the smaller the dog and vice versa. Thus even his treatment of animals in these stories carefully illuminates their owners.

Lastly, Herriot has published books exclusively for children and has published abridged additions of these stories which contain only dog or cat stories. (e,g, *James Herriot's Dog Stories* (1986), not to

be confused with *James Herriot's Favorite Dog Stories* (1995). He has also published several children's stories *Moses the Kitten* (1984) and *Only One Woof* (1985). These titles demonstrate that Wight was aware of the distinctiveness of genre.

Several elements of Herriot's stories convey his traveler's eye for unfamiliar terrain. Indeed, a hallmark of good travel writing includes telling tales of alien surroundings. Herriot wrote extensively of the dales and included descriptions of customs, food, religious practices, rites of passage and (obviously) how they treat their pets. James Wight, in a memoir of his father, writes that Herriot "was fascinated by the ways and traditions of the [Yorkshire] people, uncovering warmth, humor and other qualities…[Herriot] was studying them." (Wight, 98). Herriot observed the farmers in the dale from the position of an outsider. He arrived from Scotland, having left the large metropolitan area of Glasgow, and thus had a perspective that was different from the community of Darrowby. This perspective, at times, made it difficult for him to integrate into this alien society.

Wight notes that, "Another obstacle [for Herriot] was the learning of a new "language.' Words like 'felon' 'garget', 'marra' and 'wick' bombarded his brain as he attempted to unravel the mysteries of the Yorkshire dialect." (Wight, 97). Sometimes Herriot's writing sounds very much like that of a stranger caught in a strange land, encountering strange customs and food. On one occasion he was dining with a farmer and his wife. She offered Herriot two pieces of "bacon," each of which consisted of pure, white fat. He was torn between offending the hospitality of his hosts and eating something so unappetizing. When he despaired about how to handle the situation, he spotted a jar of piccalilli.

> Feverishly I scooped a mound of it on to my plate. It seemed to contain just about everything; onions, apples, cucumber and other assorted vegetables jostling each other in a powerful mustard-vinegar sauce. It was the work of a moment to smother my loaded fork with the mass, then I popped it into my mouth, gave a couple of quick chews and swallowed. It was a start and I hadn't tasted a thing except the piccalilli…Looking back, I realise it was one of the bravest things I have ever done. I stuck to my task unwaveringly, dipping again and again into the jar,

> keeping my mind a blank, refusing grimly to think of the horrible thing that was happening to me.… But at last I came to the end. A final heroic crunch and swallow, a long gulp at my tea and the plate was empty. The thing was accomplished. (*ATBB* 315-316)

Herriot thus encounters an experience so common to travelers, often torn between partaking in disconcerting customs or offending generous hosts.

But in this interaction, Herriot excels at recalling the voices of those who are often marginalized by contemporary societies today. Sanford Sternlicht observes that Herriot hears and transmits "the lost voices of a landed people who cared for and respected their ancient land, their beasts, and their way of life, and most of all, each other." (136). Critical to the role of a writer of travel literature is the writer's eye toward the unique and distinctive of the local

Herriot was able to observe so carefully because of his professional vantage point. Herriot's position as a veterinarian provides a unique perspective on the home as well as the professional lives of the people in the dales. A veterinarian obviously deals extensively with the sheep, cows, horses and other livestock on the dales. In addition, vets during Herriot's day had to work with large corporate farms, as well as small family farms. Herriot observes the changing financial landscape as farmers who have eked out a living in the dales and moors and must continue to scratch and claw in order to continue to survive.

James' role as a veterinarian also offers him unprecedented access to the interior lives of his patients' owners. Because Herriot began to branch out into small animal work early in his practice, he saw the inner workings of numerous dale families. This peculiar perspective allows for a rich fleshing out of characters and the rather private ways that they interacted with their pets. This twin perspective on the home and professional life of the people in the Yorkshire dales demonstrates Herriot's eye for a good story.

Ultimately it is not only the people who fall underneath this traveler's eye. Wight's Herriot quickly succumbed to the enchantment of the Yorkshire country itself. On numerous occasions, Herriot describes the land in which he lives from the social location of a

visitor. He clearly fills the role of a city dweller who is enraptured by the natural beauty that surrounds him.

Ultimately, Herriot sees the people of the dales as connected inextricably to the dales themselves. The farmers and farm-wives in some ways merge with the animals and the land. This connectedness between people and land is a central theme running throughout these works. Herriot views these people and this land as inextricably linked. This close connection between people and land reflects the notion that our geographical location always affects our social location. Even within the dales, Herriot notes different personalities depending on where the individuals live.

> The higher up the country, the more I liked them. At the bottom of the valley, where it widened into the plain, the farmers were like farmers everywhere, but the people grew more interesting as the land heightened, and in the scattered hamlets and isolated farms near the bleak tops I found their characteristics most marked; their simplicity and dignity, their rugged independence and their hospitality. (*ACGS* 67)

As Herriot progresses through these books, he notes that the farmers of the dales have begun to change him in many important ways. This change exemplifies a second important journey in these books.

Numerous literary critics have noted the importance of a second journey in travel writing. The best examples of travel writings include a journey of discovery that transcends geography and includes the development of the writer. As Michael Kowalewski notes: "while travel writing usually consists of part sociology and part natural history, it has also traditionally gone beyond "mere" ethnography by being insistently autobiographical" (8).

Wight's work is obviously autobiographical. In fact, the line between author and protagonist is so liminal as to be almost indistinguishable. But an important narrative device makes it interestingly complex. Throughout these stories, there are two narrative voices speaking to the reader. In his first narrative voice, the young James Herriot is exploring this new land and making these new acquaintances. But in the second narrative voice, an older, wiser James Herriot is reflecting on the incidents of his youth. As an example, in

*ACGS* he and Siegfried fondly notice a fine collection of medicine bottles which they are to use. "The two of us stood gazing at the gleaming rows without any idea that it was nearly all useless and that the days of the old medicines were nearly over. Soon they would be hustled into oblivion by the headlong rush of the new discoveries and they would never return." (*ACGS* 19).

As Richard Gardner observes, this complex dual structure makes a more interesting narrative. "The young man is made more likeable by being blended with the narrators thirty additional years of awareness."(Beacham 635) Brunsdales agrees and adds:

> James Herriot became a more complex literary character than his creator might originally have intended. Herriot the author supplied the grandfatherly perspective that anchored his recorded experiences on his youthful self, a character who might have begun as a humble observer, but matured and became much more interesting as the books progressed. (28)

This observation also demonstrates the sense of growth that accompanies Herriot throughout these books. As the young Herriot of the narrative world slowly transforms into the wise author reflecting fondly on the past, we accompany Herriot through that journey. As a result, the reader travels not just to the Yorkshire dales, but through life as well.

Good travel writing must include a focus upon the inner self of the writer. The journey inward is as important to the overall narrative as the journey outward. Norman Douglas wrote that:

> the reader of a good travel book is entitled not only to an exterior voyage, to descriptions of scenery and so forth, but to an interior, a sentimental or temperamental voyage, which takes place side by side with that outer one; ... the ideal book of this kind offers us, indeed, a triple opportunity of exploration—abroad, into the author's brain, and into our own. The writer should therefore possess a brain worth exploring; some philosophy of life … and the courage to proclaim it and put it to the test; he must be naif and profound, both child and sage." (Fussell 15)

But Herriot's books offer another changing protagonist, one that grows and matures alongside Herriot: the Yorkshire dales themselves. As Herriot writes, he does so from the perspective of one who has experience stretching over decades. As his son wrote later: "The world that James Herriot wrote about has all but disappeared… and the countless family farms…are now few in number" (Wight 363). Writing about events forty years after the fact provides a temporal perspective that illuminates the past while providing the author with a perspective from a fixed point. This perspective might also contribute to Herriot's honest portrayal of his own faults and mistakes. As often occurs in ethnography, the observed culture has now largely disappeared and exists only in the writings of this initial observer.

This last connection between Herriot and travel writing is the modesty of his self-portrayal. His modesty comes through the narrative in numerous ways. Part of the popularity of this series is his frank description of numerous occasions where he made mistakes, misunderstood the local farmers, or exercised poor judgment. Not every chapter ends in a successful tale of a problem solved or an animal healed. But Herriot acknowledges his mistakes and attempts to learn from them. Herriot proves a compelling protagonist, always learning and always seeking. Fussell notes that, "Travelers learn not just foreign customs and curious cuisines and unfamiliar beliefs and novel forms of government. They learn, if they are lucky, humility" (14). That humility might be the distinguishing mark between traveler and tourist.

There is also a final irony inherent to the travels of James Herriot. His process of travel writing has itself remade the Yorkshire Dales. Herriot the traveler has now affected this foreign land. It is as true in travel as it is in quantum mechanics: the observer affects the observed. Decades after his books, Wight *himself* is now identified exclusively with the Yorkshire land.

It is a fascinating irony that other travelers have now written travel guides to Herriot's Darrowby. Thirsk today stands as the center of a tourist industry as farm houses have been transformed into Bed and Breakfast homes. Tourists plan trips to Thirsk and journey to the veterinary office where he worked and the home where he lived. Around 8 million visitors a year visit the Dales area, many of them lured by Herriot's books. (Brunsdale 7).

Tourism has proven lucrative for the region, bringing in $8 million to Thirsk from 1978-1988 (Brunsdale 132)

This remaking of the dales is complete to the point of changing its name. The Yorkshire area's new name carefully aimed at travelers is Herriot Country, complete with website (www.HerriotCountry.com). Herriot brought film, books, and ultimately tourists to the Yorkshire dales, and paradoxically, the dales exist in its truest state only in his books.

His works, his stories, his remaking of the dales all offer important reasons to consider Herriot's work as an impressive example of travel literature. We should enlarge the genre of travel writing and bring Herriot in as well. As Percy Adams writes, "The library of travel literature is gigantic, but not too much so, since no library can be too large for this world, or for any reader." (Adams xi). Surely travel literature is vast enough to include a trip to the Yorkshire dales.

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