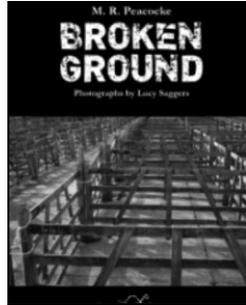


A MID-LIFE ODYSSEY: DILYS WOOD CONSIDERS M R PEACOCKE'S ACCOUNT OF RURAL LIVING IN CUMBRIA



“Aside from her accurate portrait of austere living, it’s clear that for Peacocke there is a point to being alone ... This is the opportunity for exploration of her own being”

photo © Jana Photography

Broken Ground is a fascinating read – a naturalist’s and a poet’s confessional record, vividly descriptive and often ruefully amusing. Over forty prose pieces about Peacocke’s thirty years farming in Cumbria bring us extraordinarily close to the source, nurture and discipline of her poetry. Her growth as a writer is so mixed up with the husbandry of a patch of land and its animals that we can’t delimit the boundaries of these aspects. We sense only that, in the midst of mundane tasks (often daunting and carried out alone), there’s a steady pitch of excitement and a sense of achievement, never without great ‘edginess’ and self-questioning.

Some poems are incorporated here, and some prose pieces link with published poems. A prose piece, *Fire*, shares a narrative and insights with *Notes on a Bonfire*, Peacocke’s poem originally published in *Caliban Dancing* (Shoestring, 2011; reprinted in *Fanfare*, Second Light Publications, 2015).

Fire offers a wide context, dwelling on Peacocke’s dual roles of farm-labourer (‘Rotten fence posts, prunings, wormy wood, old straw, a terrible old carpet, all get dragged up there’) and writer (making notes ‘of what I’ve noticed and have been thinking about’). The more elusive poem with its quick-fire surprises and the prose piece, with its greater expansiveness and changes of pace, bear out Peacocke’s own words, ‘prose and poems present and colour the same event differently.’

This book, very roughly chronological, begins with a sudden new phase of life undertaken in middle age: ‘I had to risk all that [former life, network of family and friends]. Earning a living, too, seemed secondary ... I did not know the area, or anyone round about ... I wept in pure terror, then I set about surviving.’ Far from the more familiar theme, ‘I ran away to write’, the discovery that she would begin writing freely again (after experiencing ‘painful blocks’ from student days on) was one surprise of many in the wilderness. Writing happened in her first summer when, completely fagged out she laboured to patch a stone wall: ‘Suddenly a poem came to me almost complete, as if I were reading it. Ah, I thought: I’m in my right place...’

The mentality of a writer is explored throughout. Self-discovery is studied to an equal degree with her appetite for unusual ‘characters’, both people and animals. These include a knowledgeable pig-killer, a curmudgeonly occasional lodger, an educated tramp, travelling people, a neighbour doling out tight-lipped praise. Old women locked into remote lives inspire strong portraits: ‘She has fierce blue eyes and a mass of grey hair which looks somewhat electric. It is natural for her to see visions.’

Equally strong are the creature portraits, showing a predilection for the oddball animal and some weird behaviours. Apricot the cow is released from the byre in the first clement Spring weather: ‘there she was, down on her knees against the ridge, digging. With her bony haunches in the air she dug and dug, her head ducking and swinging. I could hear her snorts and groans. At last she staggered to her feet ... her horns all earthy and tufted with bits of fur ... joy breathed from her whole shambling body.’

A surprise aspect of Peacocke's animal portraits is – together with the acceptance of Tennyson's "nature red in tooth and claw" – the introduction of her own hunting instinct: 'I think I was born with a hunting spirit ... I do not often let anybody else witness it because I believe that many people would be shocked – disgusted perhaps ... It isn't an urge to kill so much as to capture'. In this piece, *Rabbits*, about her lurcher's burrowing for baby rabbits and the direct help she gives, Peacocke rubs in an important element in the book – survival, its practical and psychological aspects.

Her own commitment to small-holding – 'I had an old car, an old dog, a very little money' – coincided with the end of the road for many farming families, with hard work and small rewards driving younger people off the land. Peacocke conveys how the disaster of the foot and mouth outbreak in the new millennium pushed people even further into hard-bitten stoicism. It is in the character of survivors that neighbours enter this book, which doesn't involve a 'cosy' picture of rural life, though, sometimes a warm, convivial one, with cherished stories shared: 'A quiet conversation between two bending heads. John told me stories about his working life, and how he and his wife loved dancing.'

Aside from her accurate portrait of austere living, it's clear that for Peacocke there is a *point* to being alone and undistracted. This is the opportunity for exploration of her own being: 'It seemed I had nothing to do except to live. My sense was of power and powerlessness exactly balanced.'

Her observations include vivid, minute detail: 'Bird's eye primroses grow in patches of damp, yellowish clay, drawing out of that unpromising soil a pure, sharp pink, perhaps the most surprising colour of all: it's an essence, you need only a drop of it. Rest harrow has a similar pink, but diluted and perhaps a little more blue among a blur of leaves.' She captures many exceptional effects in nature which probably only come to those who 'knock around' in every weather, season and state of mind: 'Something happened between the colours: fur [of a young fox] glowed between scarlet and crimson, flowers [bluebells] were darkened to lapis lazuli'. Alongside – and seeming to stem from the same deep attentiveness – are reports of adventures of the spirit.

Peacocke's attitude to spiritual experience is open and unfussy ('curious things swim up when I'm not looking for them'); but we are left in no doubt about their importance to her: 'it might be only at a pause in the job as you stop for breath, to judge what you've done or to rub your hands clean – and something is given. It might be of the loaves and fishes kind, or the discovery you can tread water. I believe that Quakers would call it an opening. It has little to do with happiness or sadness, maybe a way of moving on when you've felt stuck.'

It's quite hard to convey the riches of *Broken Ground*, where many different types of interest are interwoven and surprising juxtapositions are one of the pleasures. Some vignettes of isolated rural life are reminiscent of past favourite writers such as Laurie Lee or Alison Uttley in *A Country Child*. But here observation of nature and rural people are overshadowed by new pressures on the environment: 'I became aware of a different kind of eclipse that had not been forecast, losses which were not restored. One was the loss of real darkness to the smudge of light pollution ... The other ... was of bird calls.'

Above all, there's illumination here of Peacocke's already substantial oeuvre as a poet. We learn to appreciate how location, the sense of landscape and far distance, the longueurs and even the dangers of being solitary contribute to her craft. In several pieces she describes herself as launching towards some lonely or distant part of the surroundings; this instinct gives rise to a metaphor for how poems may come: 'Some reveal themselves gradually like the old trackways, always there if you had only noticed, but today you can puzzle them through. Those you are able to follow have a character that seems to be given. The point at which you begin is not really a beginning, simply the thing you noticed first ...'

Broken Ground, M R Peacocke with photographs by Lucy Sagers, Shoestring Press 2018. £11
ISBN 978-1-9125241-4-3