

ON THE EDGE: art, culture and rural communities

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¹ See Appendix 1.

THE TENSION between town and country is a cornerstone of European culture and probably of every society that has established towns.

The tension between town and country is a cornerstone of European culture

The symbiotic needs of rural and urban communities—rooted in the desire on the one hand to be fed and on the other to earn a better living—locks both into a relationship of exchange, where buyer and seller are forever trying to get a little advantage over one another, as much, perhaps, for the joy of victory as for material gain.

The symbiotic needs of rural and urban communities . . . locks both into a relationship of exchange

It's the story of the country tortoise and the city hare and there are endless variations of it, usually involving one moving into the other's territory only to discover that the survival skills which served them so well in their usual habitat have no value in these new surroundings.

It may be the country boy or girl arriving on streets supposedly paved with gold, only to be befriended, duped, fleeced and dumped, getting older and wiser in the process: French novelists made a positive industry of this story in the nineteenth century.² But it can just as well be the other way around, the city sophisticate who sets up in the country only to find themselves befriended, duped, fleeced and dumped: if they're really unlucky, they'll be butchered too because, as that poet of the city Tom Waits knows, 'There's always some killin' you got to do around the farm'.³ The degree of bitterness expressed by these morality tales depends

² Cf. Stendhal *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Dumas *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, Balzac *Illusions Perdues*, Flaubert *L'Education sentimentale*, Maupassant *Bel-Ami* etc.

³ *Murder in the Red Barn*, Tom Waits, Warner Chappell Music Ltd. 1992; films like *Psycho*, *Straw Dogs* and *The Wicker Man* among many exploit the town-dweller's fear of the countryside's primeval forces.

largely on the perspective and affiliation of their creators.

We have constructed an archetype of opposites: town/country; radical/conservative; lively/dull; sophisticated/conventional; tense/peaceful; frivolous/rooted; industry/agriculture; man-made/natural etc.

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Town and country is one of the basic expressions of interdependent contrasts, of yin and yang, through which humanity interprets its experience. How we respond to these polarities says more about us than about either town or country. But in truth, almost everything that can be said about one has its counterpart in the other: greed is supposed to typify city slickers and big farmers equally; the city is notorious for individual loneliness—think of the sad typist in Eliot's *Waste Land* or Paul McCartney's Eleanor Rigby—yet it is always the country which is described as isolated.

All this matters because these ideas are rooted in values and expressed through culture, including its particularly self-conscious and focused articulation, art. It is these values, often congealed into assumptions, that make the idea that adventurous, challenging even difficult art might be nurtured or even indigenous to remote rural areas difficult for some people—wherever they live—to accept. But the very notion of remoteness, which underpins the thinking behind this conference, is itself a polarity, inseparable from its counterpart, because it is defined by its relationship to something characterised as the centre. I am reminded of the notorious 1930s English newspaper headline: 'Fog in Channel: continent isolated'. A friend visiting the Faroe Islands was once gently put right by a resident who explained that, far from being isolated, they lived on a maritime crossroads with a constant flow of arrivals and departures. So we should be careful with this interesting concept of the edge, and keep in mind that one person's margin may be another's heartland.

All of these ideas about the difference between town and country, centre and edge, are given an increased importance by the historic shifts in balance between the poles which are now taking place. At the end of the Second World War, human experience was still predominantly rural: less than a third of the world's population lived in urban areas, though industrialised countries had much larger urban populations. By 1994, the proportion of us living in cities had risen to almost 45%, and current forecasts put this figure at 61% by 2025—a complete reversal of the situation in

⁴ Jelin, Elizabeth (1998), 'Cities, culture and globalisation' in *World Culture Report*, Paris: UNESCO

1950.⁴ In effect, in the space of two or three generations, a relationship between urban and rural life, which has been broadly constant throughout human history, will have been reversed.

This has all sorts of practical implications that will be familiar to anyone who knows rural areas. Depopulation begins a vicious spiral of decline. There are not enough people to keep collective services viable, so shops, schools, public transport, health services and so on are gradually closed or withdrawn, each loss making life more difficult for those who remain. The privatisation of our lives that has been characteristic of current economic liberalism is, if anything, more marked in rural areas because it is now so difficult to live there without being able to provide individually for your needs. It is not only services that cease to be viable: the whole economy may be destabilised, with major consequences for the environment that had formerly supported it. Activities that once provided an adequate if not rich living, particularly in agriculture and conservation, simply cease to be worth doing, at least in financial terms. In areas close enough to town to allow commuting, wealthy town-dwellers buy houses, though less often land, pushing up prices and pushing out young locals: further afield, especially in the absence of ideal scenic beauty, the result is simply dereliction. In such circumstances it is little wonder if rural communities seize the opportunities provided by external investment in new industries or mineral extraction: after all, as George W. Bush knows, a wilderness is only as good as its oil reserves.

But it is the cultural implications of the shifting balance between town and country which are of more immediate concern to us here—though, as we shall find, the cultural and practical aspects of this change are not easy to disentangle. So what are the cultural implications?

. . . the steady rise of the town means that urban experience, values and culture will come to dominate our sense of what it is to be human

⁵ Although media images of urban life are dominated by fiction such as *Friends*, the reality of millions of urban lives is better expressed by groups like Niños Fotografos de Guatemala; the photography work of children who live on refuse tips in Guatemala City provides a route to education and presents alternative images to challenge those of multinational media corporations. <http://www.oneworld.org/media/gallery/guatemala/1.html>

To judge by industrialised European precedents, the steady rise of the town means that urban experience, values and culture will come to dominate our sense of what it is to be human. Since this urban perspective is broadly shared by the major commercial media industries, it is being promoted very fast and very powerfully. Yet, even within its own terms, what dominates is a minority view: there is little room for the poor, the non-white or the marginalised who actually make up the majority of city dwellers.⁵

Where does this leave those who live in the country, by accident, necessity or choice and face the challenge of building viable

communities? Where does it leave the balance between urban and rural cultures, urban and rural values? This conference, among other things, is intended to help us answer such questions by shining light on some of the responses that have been found in different parts of Europe.

One natural place to start looking for a future for rural culture—according to some—is the past. After all, that is where rural culture has so often seemed to be located, in contrast to the exploratory mission of urban modernism. Rural culture is easily characterised as heritage, and it is true that much of its assets and activity has deep roots. Traditional music and dance, as well as age-old rituals like Derbyshire's springtime well dressings, do represent much of what is culturally distinctive about rural areas. Museums of rural life abound, filled with the discarded implements of another age, pictures of smocked labourers peering through the fog of nineteenth century photography and examples of rural crafts like the emblematic corn dolly. Even the animals are preserved in 'working farm museums' as rare breeds.

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It is significant how easily the word 'craft', so long abused by metropolitan aesthetes to damn artefacts which they do not cherish, is associated with the countryside—as if anything that might be termed art could not possibly occur in such a backward and unsophisticated society. Where fine art does appear in the country, it is usually trapped like a fly within the amber glow of the country house. Few things more easily confirm urban disdain for rural culture than these dinosaurs, the former homes of aristocrats and plutocrats whose bones still litter the European landscape—though many have been stripped and others returned to the ground from which they grew. After all, they not only evoke the past, and the loss of power which the country has experienced since the industrial revolution, they conclusively demonstrate—at least to the urban mind—that the countryside's treasures have always been the gifts of the city. To misquote Wycherley, 'A little country retreat near the town should be like a mistress, not to dwell in constantly, but only for a night and away'⁶.

⁶ William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, Act I, Scene I; the actual line reads 'A mistress should be like a little country retreat near the town, not to dwell in constantly, but only for a night and away'.

The country can claim a central part in the shaping of our collective culture not least because so many of our greatest artists, writers, musicians and other visionaries were born and raised there

Of course, this picture of the arts in rural areas is, at best, a half-truth—an urban myth if you like. The country can claim a central part in the shaping of our collective culture not least because so many of our greatest artists, writers, musicians and other visionaries were born and raised there. For every Dickens or Blake, there is a Hardy, Clare or Brontë. Although the city has always had the power to draw the talented, if only to test themselves against others, many of the country's children who end up there use it as a vantage point from which to survey their rural heartland: Maupassant, Turgenev and Lewis Grassie Gibbon illustrate the point. Others, particularly those like writers and painters whose art is essentially individual, have remained in the country, using their distance from dominant cultural debates to nurture radical innovations: one might think of Laurence Sterne, reinventing the novel in his Yorkshire vicarage, or Paul Cézanne, laying the foundations of modern art on the landscape of his native Provence.

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The country, its values and the life which is lived there have themselves always been the subject of art, literature and, if such a thing can really be, of music.

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There is, in truth, nothing essentially backward-looking, conservative or traditional in rural culture. There are too many innovators, in too many fields, who have belonged to the country or used it as source material for that to be a defensible proposition. Rural culture is different from urban culture—quieter perhaps, more reflective and closer to its own past and the elemental forces which we shelter from in cities; other interpretations will certainly be articulated. But, however we characterise it, we cannot deny that it has been as creative, as adventurous and as influential as any culture forged in the diversity of the city.

However, if the balance between town and country is shifting in the ways I have suggested, then all of us who care about the future of culture—and of people and their values since this comes to much the same thing—must have some concern for the potential consequences on rural culture.

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Is it inevitable that this alternative way of imagining and expressing experience should be marginalised by louder, urban voices? That would be lamentable, both because it would effectively disenfranchise many people from being cultural actors, with all the dangers that ensue, and because cultural diversity is, in its own way, as important to the future of humanity as biological diversity.

I believe that marginalisation can be prevented and that doing so would offer cultural and other advantages to rural communities—and to their urban counterparts. I suggest three avenues which contemporary rural arts practice might fruitfully explore: **conservation, rural development and cultural challenge.**

Conservation is the obvious course—after all, balancing preservation with development has always been a preoccupation of rural communities. If rural culture and values are under threat, it is natural to wish to protect them. The recent emergence in Britain of the Countryside Alliance to champion a wide range of rural concerns is an understandable if not always coherent symptom of just such a reaction.

But it is possible to imagine a less defensive approach to conservation, one based more in principle than self-preservation, an approach which values diversity in itself—including, of course, that of opposing cultures—and sees traditional rural cultures as a crucial part of our rich personal and shared identities. It would argue that these cultures should be protected and nurtured because they are part of our selves, whether we live in towns or in the country, and that their future accessibility is essential if we are to be able to understand who we are and where we have come from.

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A belief in true cultural diversity, like democracy, implies an understanding that our cultures are as interdependent as we are ourselves: if one should die, we are all impoverished—the bell tolls for us all, for humanity. That said, we are a long way from developing a coherent philosophy of multiculturalism or cultural diversity in a world where few, if any, of us accepts all behaviours, all values and consequently all cultures as moral equivalents: but that is a discussion for another day.

The approach to cultural conservation I envisage would also recognise the value of rural cultural perspectives precisely because they are a minority alternative to the mainstream, an essential contrast and a renewable resource on which dominant cultures can draw. Finally, it would value rural cultures as the unique expressions of human experience and a source of great pleasure

and deep satisfaction. In case all this seems somewhat abstract, let me draw your attention to the experience of the fèisean movement, which has spread across the highlands and islands of Scotland and even into its cities, over the past fifteen years. Rita Hunter will speak about this revival of Gaelic culture later, but I would like to say one thing about them in this context.

The fèisean depend on characteristics which are particularly undervalued, not to say despised, by contemporary urban cultural perspectives: they are rural, they focus on children, they explore traditional arts, they are mostly run by volunteers and by women. They break other rules: they value oral tradition, form, technical achievement and are not overly preoccupied with self-expression and yet, to the dismay of some traditionalists, many are unafraid to link traditional music and dance with contemporary sensibilities. Good: not only do they conserve a centuries-old body of work and cultural sensibility, they do so in a way that keeps alive an important alternative to the easy assumptions of modern cultural norms. What a valuable role they play.

The second area where the future of rural culture might be explored is in the context of rural development itself, and that is something of which we shall hear a good deal here. The arts have, of course, always been tied to other human objectives, whether we think of their ritual and religious importance, their association with princes, states and corporations or their commercial value. In recent years, to these more established uses of culture have been added other aspirations reflecting current policy concerns—regeneration, tourism development, educational and health improvements, crime reduction and so on.

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By forging connections with the wider social and economic objectives of their own communities—always bearing in mind that it is culture itself which shapes those objectives—artists and other cultural professionals can build successful symbiotic relationships with a diverse range of partners.

The range of possibilities is almost endless, from natural and human heritage resources to the contemporary arts. Festivals have become important to many rural communities, while ideas like the Book Town movement have pointed the way to more permanent niche markets: Scotland has its own in Wigtown.⁷ And the benefits are real, even in tiny places. Not so far from here, in the parish of Arbuthnott, some enterprising local people have established the

⁷ <http://www.booktown.com/>

⁸ <http://www.grassicgibbon.com/Default.htm>

Grassic Gibbon Centre to celebrate one of Scotland's best loved twentieth century writers in his birthplace.⁸ A small museum and study centre was opened in 1992 next to the Parish Hall and now attracts about 7,000 visitors a year. Not a huge number, but enough to secure one full-time and six part-time jobs. The Centre's economic viability—achieved without public funding—brings social and cultural benefits. It has become an important focus and meeting place for this dispersed community of 200 people; its café caters for a regular social services lunch group while the hall acts as a base for the post office. In this centenary year of Lewis Grassic Gibbon's birth a range of special events have been planned: it will certainly be worth visiting.

One crucial role for rural cultures in the new century must be to question increasingly dominant urban cultural norms

The final area I want to consider I hinted at in my earlier comments about the fèisean movement. One crucial role for rural cultures in the new century must be to question increasingly dominant urban cultural norms. The arts are, as they have always been, a vital means of understanding and shaping our experience: but that experience is much more diverse, much richer than you would guess from most of the voices which are raised in the national conversation. It is essential that rural experiences, insights and values are brought to the heart of these debates.

Let me illustrate what I mean through the example of one artwork created last year by Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy is an interesting instance of an artist who has succeeded in reaching a huge international public from a base in rural Scotland and through work which always uses natural materials and is often impermanent—all characteristics which, I suspect, contribute to the slightly patronising way in which his work is regarded by some critics. In the early morning of 21 June 2000 Goldsworthy deposited thirteen huge snowballs in various locations around the city of London⁹. Each weighed about a ton and had been kept in cold storage since the previous winter. During the course of the day, to the delight and wonder of many passers-by, the mysterious snowballs melted, revealing small natural treasures—wool, crow feathers, chestnut seeds, pine cones, elderberries, barley, barbed wire, chalk, highland cow hair and so on—which had been trapped inside.

⁹ <http://www.eyestorm.com/events/goldsworthy/>

The work was extraordinary for a number of reasons. It brought icy winter to midsummer, connecting solstices across the year. It brought the natural world into the man-made environment of the city of London. It brought a sense of the reality of global warming to the financial heart of capitalist enterprise. It valued the moment,

the fleeting now, in a place dedicated to futures and permanence. And it did all that elliptically, through a simple, powerful symbolism open to many interpretations and responses, producing curiosity and smiles rather than alienation: it was deeply thought-provoking, but achieved that through unfashionable means like beauty, mystery, stillness. It was particularly exceptional in the context of much contemporary urban visual arts practice in being more interested in the world independent of humans than in the personality or experience of the artist. Far from being a statement, it asked questions in the murmur of an artist thinking aloud; as such it invited participation rather than a reaction and in that sense it was an essentially democratic approach to art.

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In the end, I believe that this is perhaps the most crucial role for contemporary rural culture: to engage critically with urban cultural values. Yes, there is vital need for conservation of rural traditions, and there is a crucial role to play in securing the future sustainability of rural communities. But unless artists rooted in rural communities are prepared to take their values into the city, their work in the other two areas will always remain marginal in every sense of the word. Instead, I believe, they should be using their position on the edge to test and challenge the town, its ways of doing things and its values—as the country has always done.