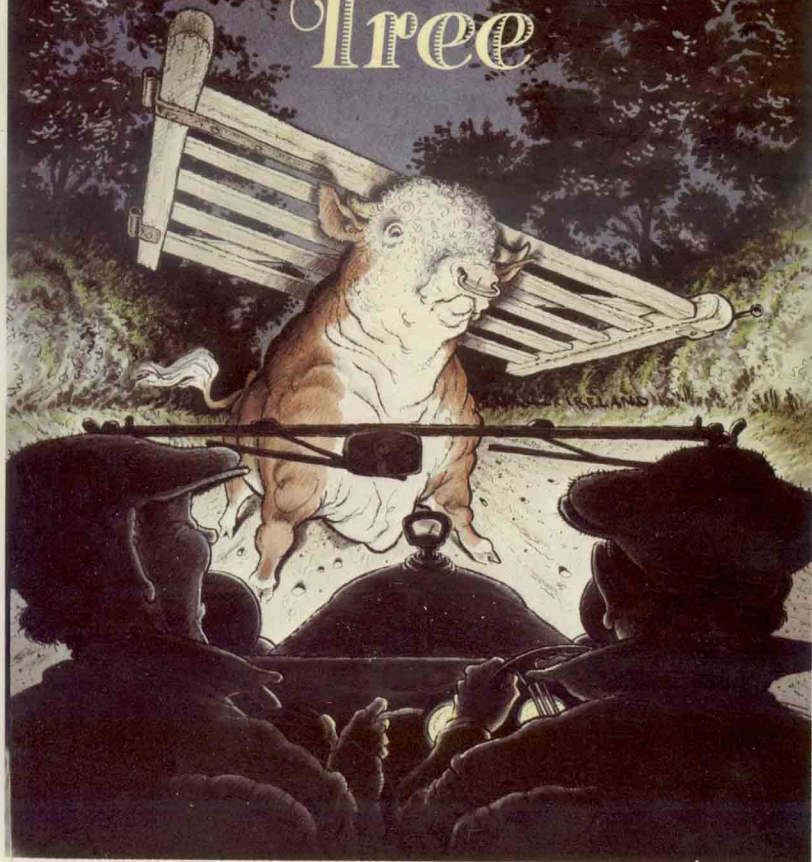


20TH CENTURY CLASSICS

Adrian Bell

The Cherry Tree



Introduced by Humphrey Phelps



ADRIAN BELL

The Cherry Tree



INTRODUCED BY
HUMPHREY PHELPS

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NOTE

None of the characters in this book is to be regarded as the portrait of a living person.

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INTRODUCTION

BY HUMPHREY PHELPS

The Cherry Tree is the final volume of Adrian Bell's famous Suffolk trilogy, begun with *Corduroy* and *Silver Ley*. Together, written in Bell's characteristically fine prose, they tell the story of a town boy's transformation into a countryman and record the ways of a now vanished rural world and of the old system of farming. Though I say *fine* I will not say *finest* for that implies comparison, and the work of Adrian Bell is incomparable. There have been other good rural writers but Adrian Bell is unique. In his books, he does not merely record, but recreates the substance and sensations of a living, working world—a world now dead but one which lives perennially in his pages and one in which we too feel we are living and working. We can hear the rustle of the sheaves and the rumble of the wagons in the harvest field; smell the scent of the newly-ploughed earth, the sweat of the horses, the steaming dung-hill. No, this is no mere record, this really is rural life and work, authentic in every detail, truth shining with beauty.

It was good fortune which sent Adrian Bell, fleeing from London and the threat of an office life, into Suffolk in 1920. It was still the time of 'high farming', the rules of good husbandry prevailed, the horse ruled the farm, and the old rural structure was still intact. Soon, and within the period covered by the trilogy, the fabric of this way of life began to crumble.

The volumes of this trilogy were only the first of Adrian Bell's books to enrich English rural literature;

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the personal narrative, embodying the quintessence of rural England, is continued in *By Road* (1937), *Apple Acre* (1942), *Sunrise to Sunset* (1944), and *The Budding Morrow* (1947). A different kind of trilogy comprises *The Balcony* (1934), *A Young Man's Fancy* (1955), and *The Mill House* (1958).

Two unautobiographical novels, *The Shepherd's Farm* and *Folly Field*, appeared in the thirties; another, *Music in the Morning* (1954), has been called 'a twentieth-century Cranford'. He published a book of poems in 1934 and another in 1935, and an anthology of English rural life in 1936. There are also several books of essays and the autobiography. Not all his work reaches the peak attained by the Suffolk trilogy, but some, I think, surpasses it, particularly *Men and the Fields*. Neglected for so long, this is happily and deservedly back in print. Judging by this wealth of writing, the time of his arrival in Suffolk was all-important, a tremendous stroke of luck for English rural literature, for us and for generations to come. Credit must also be given to Mr Colville, Bell's mentor at Farley Hall, who taught him those agricultural details of which, as a London refugee in 1920, he knew nothing.

'I am thankful I was born early enough to hear the rumble of harvest wagons,' Bell wrote in an essay fifty years later:

I am glad to have forked sheaves . . . Now I see the rare rhythms of their work, building a round stack broadening from the base like a peg top. What instinct, what an eye for form they had . . . But who can transmit to paper the quiet of their strenuous farming days, or the rhythm of the tread of a dozen horses in plough-trace or shafts, which governed the rhythm of the farm? Or recall its chime of small sounds—ting of pail, spud scraping plough breast, clang of rib-roll, chains jingling as a team swung homeward at the end of the day?

Who indeed but Adrian Bell, who also wrote: 'I like, too, to see the scythes swinging . . . Two scythes swinging

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are more than twice the beauty of one scythe swinging, because harmony is added to rhythm'? There is rhythm and harmony in his prose, and he captures the rhythm of farm work because he experienced it. Unlike Bell, most, perhaps all, of the other great rural writers were only observers. Because he had forked sheaves, spread muck, ploughed, hoed, and had done all those other countless jobs on the farm, his work has both authenticity and understanding.

As he himself wrote in an essay in 1972, 'Hardy had only a superficial idea of what farm work entailed.' And Bell goes on to say that Richard Jefferies too, in writing about the farm labourer without first-hand experience of farm work, was led to the mistaken conclusion that 'his life and work were animal'. Jefferies and writers like him stated correctly that the farm worker was abominably underpaid and housed, but

without thinking further, because they did not know, they adduced his miserable condition also to the work itself, as rendered the man as animal as his horse. They noticed what a strain it looked for a man to pitch sheaf after sheaf on to a wagon, and the long walk behind plough and horse-hoe, and the jobs of scything (but read Tolstoy who did it), of plying a billhook all day, or using any of the many hand tools of the trade. They were ignorant of the inherent rhythm . . . Now hardly anyone remembers what Hardy and Jefferies and onlookers never divined—namely those rhythms which gave a sort of jollity to the job of using all the tools of farming, so that men could talk and joke as they did it.

Adrian Bell was, as he admitted, a romantic, but a realistic romantic, depicting a range of memorable scenes which are both idyllic and authentic. He found poetry in the stiff obdurate Suffolk clay. As he goes about his work in the fields and barns we feel that we are accompanying him; we too hear the talk of farmers, farmworkers, dealers. We follow and appreciate the cadences and peculiarities of the Suffolk dialect. There

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is never a false note, never a false move or situation, his sensitivity never descends to sentimentality. The rhythm is always there, the balance is always maintained.

Bell's evocation of his rural world is a considerable achievement, so lightly done that we scarcely notice how considerable it is: so apparently simple and yet so profound. It is a world that he has created, a world with more dimensions than we ever realized; a world in which the common, mundane occurrences and things of everyday life and use are seen to be continually fresh and exciting. Like Walter de la Mare he realized:

The lovely in life is the familiar,
And only the lovelier for continuing strange.

And Bell's writing, especially in *The Cherry Tree*, is consistently worthy of comparison with de la Mare's verse:

It was continually with me, as I went about that morning, that such beauty, the bright-worn, manual workaday beauty of what one used, was the light of life for me, though it had not occurred to me in those words. For labour, I feel, is the key to satisfying life, the soother of worry, preparing one also for the appreciation of food and rest. If you consider bodily toil primitive and blunting (as you may be justified in doing), then this beauty is a very pedestrian affair, but I confess I am touched always with a sense of mystery at sight of things that flash and shine with use among the mire they move in; it is always a little miracle of transfiguration—ploughshares, iron toe-pieces of men's boots, fork prongs and chains.

This gift to see and to convey his insights to the reader was developed as he continued to write, and in his later books commonplace incidents and moments in time are invested with an irresistible charm and life. Some of these later books have little enough of a story-line; they are essays, snatches of a spiritual autobiography; an incident sets him off thinking, he talks to himself, and the reader is a privileged listener.

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In 1961, Adrian Bell published his autobiography, *My Own Master*, which showed that *The Cherry Tree* and its companions were subjected to some selection and adaptation—'gently novelized memoirs' was the phrase used by Ronald Blythe. With this proviso, we can accept the trilogy as autobiography, which is what it essentially is.

By the time *The Cherry Tree* opens, the author has published a book, 'a bull-headed account of my year at Farley Hall'. He has been living at his own farm, Silver Ley, for several years, as a bachelor, but soon he tires of solitude and marries. I do not propose to recount or explain the story you are about to read; to do so would be unnecessary as well as impertinent. It is sufficient to say that Bell has written a love story; of a man and woman starting life together and of their love for the land. As he says, 'There were spheres of influence—mine the farm, Nora's the house—but in the garden they and we met.' Yet this book is more than that, just as the storm that has wrecked the cherry tree—the king of the former orchard—also represents the greater storm of social upheaval, caused by the repeal of the Corn Production Act. Bell does not fantasize when he shows us the effects of the farming depression: ruined fields and barns, ruined farmers and farm workers, dereliction and despair, the crumbling of the rural structure, a different type of farming, different methods and remedies in a desperate situation. Nothing is glossed over, nothing minimized. Yet despite everything this is still a happy book, happy because its many vignettes are truthful and humorous, because its love of life sustains its buoyancy, and because its cheerfulness endures the times of hardship.

It is clear from Adrian Bell's books that a former townsman has produced the classic account of farming. This is not so surprising as it might seem: other townsmen turned countrymen have also produced good, if dissimilar, types of rural writing. The difference is that

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none became a part of the country in the way that Adrian Bell did. Indeed, many countrymen who have produced good rural books, after extolling the virtues and attractions of the country, hastened to the town at the first opportunity. Bell on the other hand went to Suffolk and remained there.

His complete authenticity and feel for the country have an especial appeal for me. Authenticity in country writing is comparatively rare, for even the most respected writers are guilty of inaccuracy. But never Bell, who had himself performed the routine tasks he describes. He knew that much of real farming—particularly in the case of the small farmer—as opposed to textbook farming consists of making do with what is at hand. And whatever the experts say, farming is not just another industry—it is an occupation, a way of life. Bell described an English peasant-proprietor as

that most honourable, rare and misunderstood of men. It is fineness, not boorishness, that is his hallmark. A feast of English quality it is; his one man's success cancels a host of defects in me, it is the very sweet and secret juice of England that has come to fruition against the bitterest weather, economic and political, of all time.

But alas, since that was written, such men, along with the farm workers, the horses, and the arts of husbandry, have been driven from the land. It was with extraordinary commitment and understanding that Bell prophesied: 'By going back to nature as our educator, we seek to remind ourselves and our fellows of the unchanging laws of our existence. Starve the soil by greed and idleness, take everything out of it and put nothing back, and there follows disease of soil, of plant, of beast and man.' But his words were not heeded.

Like his friends and fellow-writers, H. J. Massingham and C. Henry Warren, he was concerned about the way farming was developing. And in country life he put as much emphasis on rural culture as upon agriculture. He

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was not, however, as consistent in his attitude to 'scientific farming' as Massingham, and took a more ambivalent view of mechanization. These apparent inconsistencies were the result of his being a farmer and knowing the eternal struggle to beat the weather, to take advantage of the right soil conditions. Machines he thought gave that advantage. He tried to reconcile nature and technology, and *The Flower and the Wheel* was the title of one of his most thoughtful and perceptive books, which Massingham called 'a litany of earth'. That desirable but difficult balance was not achieved; the wheel came to crush the flower, and finally wreck the rural structure, and make the country a landscape without labourers.

One day in 1979 he looked out of his window and wrote, 'Never a ploughman, never a one. In fact one, and only one in a landscape which in my youth was full of horses, men and boys . . . Only the Black Death in the past has so decimated a countryside as modern farming has done.'

In 1939 he moved to Redisham in East Suffolk and there on his farm he bred Red Polls, the Suffolk breed of cattle. In conversation and in his writing he often referred to his favourite cow, Strawberry. And once he wrote a moving account of cattle breeding;

So generation [of cattle] followed generation—in a man's life not so many generations. From the first days of buying some in-calf heifers; just a collection at first (and himself lately married). Then gradually a certain type . . . a certain conformation . . . At last a herd, and not a collection . . . Soon grey hairs are here. What has he achieved? To him it seems nothing, he's no more than begun.

Massingham believed that Adrian Bell was the friend of lords and labourers, saying 'Gold and gems adorn his plough . . . And as he writes in his books so he talks with his friends . . . But if you listen closely to his casual,

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rather drawling and desultory words, you inhale poetry as from a bean-field, you perceive truths, you gather wisdom. You think: 'Here is a man who understands the structure of life; how happy am I in his friendship and confidence!'

I knew Adrian Bell for rather more than twenty years and can confirm the accuracy of Massingham's words. Bell, the man, was as good as his books, in fact he was his books and his books were him. I last saw him a few weeks before his death, and even then when he was in great pain he still had something of that incredible youthfulness and quiet sense of humour which he had retained for so long.

And Mrs Bell, she was exactly as you hoped but hardly dared expect to be; in short, the one you are about to meet in *The Cherry Tree*. This book and the succeeding books owe a lot to Mrs Bell. Theirs was indeed a marriage of true minds.

This trilogy is justly famous, and Adrian Bell has been praised as a writer, but I do not believe he has as yet been accorded the honour he undoubtedly deserves. During the latter years of his life it seemed that his work was almost ignored or neglected. Modest as he was, he must have had some idea of his achievement and though he never let it show, this must have been a source of disappointment to him. I can only guess at why he seemed almost forgotten. Perhaps he was hard to place because he belonged to no particular school of rural writing. Perhaps because he used no literary tricks. Perhaps because sensitive and elegant writing were no longer fashionable. I do not know, but I am glad that this trilogy is now available to a new public; and I do know that after many a writer has been forgotten, when many a fashion has died, he will be remembered and his work will still live.

CHAPTER I

How long had I been standing here under the old cherry tree? Minutes or years? While the storm with its batteries of thunder deployed across the sky, letting fall but a few drops—for all its growling—which the boughs above me caught and shook till they sparkled. It was as my man Walter always said; no rain came to us at Silver Ley Farm from the west—that is, from over the murk of trees that were Benfield Manor Park—and if the sky blew up black as ink from there, why, so it might. Walter would be still in his shirt-sleeves, nor even cock an anxious eye.

Although I'd been farming Silver Ley for several years, I was still of little faith in that one respect, and had to pause on my way out to the fields and shelter under the cherry tree against what seemed an imminent cloudburst. Not that the laughing blossom was any protection, snowing thinly down, but the trunk was curved over like an old man's body, and there was a hollow where once a swarm of bees had hived and the honey had been cut out. Walter remembered that as a boy.

And so, like Christian when he met with Apollyon in the way, my cherry tree brandished its sparkling blossoms at the storm, which drew away muttering, and darting its lightning.

And, like the light of faith justified, the sun shone dazzlingly again on Walter's shirt-sleeves, as he worked with the hoe, and prepared to tell me "I told you so."

But I find myself in memory a long time under the

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cherry tree. It was a veteran in a young orchard, standing not many steps from the house, just the spot to which one would resort on fine mornings after breakfast, in that temporary mood of a cigarette, to take stock of the day, and the spot where in summer, coming down hot and thirsty from the harvest-field for that precious quarter-hour of "fourses," one would find tea all ready set out on a white cloth on the grass. There I have watched night take ultimate possession of the earth with a huge sigh in the leaves. I have been among its boughs, too, after the spare fruit, the gay baubles of cherries, when the wind has rocked the tree, and I have felt myself riding the air, rising and falling as with the breath of some cosmic trance.

When I first came to Silver Ley, ruthless as a new broom, I took an axe and felled half an acre of old fruit trees—beautiful things, especially in spring, when, sported with blossoms, their rheumatically limbs seemed contorted with a kind of bizarre courtesy, a gallant attempt to remember their bow and their curtsy beneath the sprig of youth. But their trunks—yea, even their faintest twigs—were green as grass, and they bore hard, harsh little apples, or none at all, so I had them down despite the entreaty of their attitude, and planted young trees of my favourite sorts in their stead, which was a tacit pledge to myself of many years at Silver Ley to enjoy their fruit.

Only the old cherry tree I spared, who was king of the orchard. My hand had been stayed by Walter's remonstrance in the first place that "that were a master great tree for a cherry, aye, that were the head cherry tree as ever he did see." And so many of his boyhood's pranks had been connected with it, all of which he told me in full detail, that it came to have quite a story for me too, and there was always a ghost of a boy clambering about in it. A bedridden old woman had sent word, or Walter had made out she did, that she hoped I wasn't

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going to "down" with the old cherry tree, as that made a fine show in the spring, to be seen right from her window in the village, and it did anyone's heart good, especially such as couldn't get about.

I was glad in the spring that it was still there, for it was like a white cloud tethered to earth; its top could be seen billowing up over the horizon from a long way off.

As the years passed, for me too the cherry tree came to be full of associations, so that, as I looked back, the strenuous times were forgotten, and I seemed to have been standing there for a long hour chatting to a now scattered company of strangers, friends, companions, farmers, and men.

But last night we heard a crash above the wind, and this morning the cherry tree is lying at full length along the orchard, having smashed a gap in the hedge with its top, through which the cattle have strayed, and now are rubbing their necks against its topmost branches.

That is why, as I sat down to write this morning, with that great gap of sky where I had expected the familiar boughs alive with bird moments, and found the room more coldly bright, the cherry tree seemed to have been central in all my sunlit hours and the gap of sky a gap in my life also. For, on coming into the room, I had forgotten for the space of a second what had happened. Then, having a number of things concerning my life here to tell of, and going back in thought, seeking where to begin, I saw myself standing under the cherry tree that day in early spring, so I planted it at the head of my page.

CHAPTER II

It is good to be a bachelor while freedom has still the bloom on it and is prized for itself alone. I used to pity those who were married, like men caught in a trap by one leg; for they never seemed whole-heartedly in one place, but while with one foot were among a merry gathering, with the other seemed always stuck fast at home. They would be ever fingering for their watches, with mumblings about "the wife expecting me back." But, after all, the brightest occasion had to finish some time, even for the freest of us, and I'll admit that the smile died away as one blundered up the dark garden path and flashed one's torch on to a mound of white ash in the living-room grate and the remains of breakfast on the table. Silence seemed more than silence after late laughter; and one had no heart to cook a meal, but had some bread and cheese by an oil stove and went to bed. At such times I had inklings that perhaps the boot was on the other leg, and those fellows who always left early pitied *me*! However that may be, in time mere freedom became empty of possibility. I wearied of solitude and married a wife.

(As I am writing a book about a farm I suppose this last fact should be thus baldly stated and left at that. But I cannot forbear re-living those disconnected moments that stand forth in mind as the code by which memory interprets the past. If anyone is impatient with me, and would be on the farm, let him go on to page 19 where I will be with him shortly.)

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Now one evening, after I had had my tea, I was rummaging in my cupboard and shuffling my bills when I came upon my first farm account-book, and read again the entries of my early days as a farmer here. That set me musing on the past, and on the year I had spent with Mr. Colville at Farley Hall as a pupil on his farm, then a feckless cockney youth full of baseless fancies. I was very glad the experience had been mine; and, as my evenings were long, lonely, and unoccupied, I began to write of it, the more clearly to summon it up. Yes, after completely renouncing the pen at twenty, at the end of ten years I found myself taking it up again to write, not the mysterious poems of my youth, but a bull-headed account of my year at Farley Hall. It even achieved publication, and that really surprised me, for, though the subject was of interest to me, I didn't think it would be to a world busy for the most part on more novel problems. I enjoyed writing it; it was merely putting on paper the mental diary I had kept of those days, and it somehow made my present life more emphatically worth while. Not that the book, when I received my six gratis copies, seemed to have anything to do with me. I turned the printed pages curiously; and seemed to come face to face with my reflection unexpectedly in a mirror.

One morning I received a letter from one who said she had enjoyed reading of the days at Farley Hall, and the reason for her enjoyment had been, she said, that the life seemed "like clean linen, shining forks and spoons, the beauty of everything you use every day." It was continually with me, as I went about that morning, that such beauty, the bright-worn, manual workaday beauty of what one used, was the light of life for me, though it had not occurred to me in those words. For labour, I feel, is the key to satisfying life, the soother of worry, preparing one also for the appreciation of food and rest. If you consider bodily toil primitive and

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blunting (as you may be justified in doing), then this beauty is a very pedestrian affair, but I confess I am touched always with a sense of mystery at sight of things that flash and shine with use among the mire they move in; it is always a little miracle of transfiguration—ploughshares, iron toe-pieces of men's boots, fork-prongs, and chains.

There was no address to the letter I received, or I should have written thanking my friend for her words.

Now coincidence, I know, has no story value whatever; yet every person in actual life experiences one or two startling coincidences, and one of mine was that later I met by chance the person who had written to me.

She lived in London. She worked in an office, in a great block of buildings near the Abbey and facing the hospital at Westminster, whose architecture, supposedly ecclesiastical, actually looked mediæval and prison-like. It looked to me, at all events, like Doubting Castle, in which lived Giant Despair, for how should one single-handed storm that citadel against all the forces and inducements of civilisation, and carry off a woman from its warm imprisonment to the cold freedom of my Anglia? For that was what I intended, having fallen in love.

As I stood at the corner, breasting the storm of traffic, I noticed that a news vendor had left his pitch temporarily; his pile of papers lay on the wall there, held down by a stone: beside it lay a small pile of coppers. As I waited by that building for its prisoner to be let out on parole, I noticed that every so often a passer-by would lift the stone and take a paper, adding also a copper to the pile. Yet, strange to say, no one in this great cyclone of mercenary endeavour thought fit to take those pennies for his own use. This stood as a sign to me that the bark of the city might be worse than its bite.