

SUSSEX POETS

BY E. B. OSBORN

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(LONDON TORY DAILY)

It is not necessary to have been born in Sussex to become a Sussex poet. You need only have the South Saxon character so well suggested in John Taylor's couplet:

To hear much, to say little, and do less,
Are great preservatives of quietness

and the required faculty of rhythm and reason to qualify as a poet-lover of the county with the most lovable scenery in England—little rivers with forget-me-not growing everywhere along their winding banks, deep water-meadows full of drowsy kine, and high-columned woodland sanctuaries, Romney Marsh "just riddle with diks and sluices, an' tide-gates an' water-lets," and, above all, the Downs, the gentlest uplands in the world, that seem to be the very bosom of Mother Earth. Romney Marsh, when the silver water-lilies are out—ready to crown the little Queen of the May at Winchelsea—is perhaps my own favourite part of Sussex, and always as I think of it, a stanza of E. G. Buck-eridge's beautiful song sings itself in the soul's attentive ear.

And so I came through Romney marsh
That holds no house or tree,
Only the wide, sheep-dotted grass
That once was sand and sea,
Only the frail windmills that lift
Against the sunset fire,
And faintly pencilled on the drift
The ghost of Romney spire.

Yet, while I would rather find out
the way to some hillside meadow,
where the daffodils grow (there is one

near Fittleworth or used to be) and
see their golden dancing:

And whoever walks along there
Stops short and sees,
By the moist tree-roots
In a clearing of the trees,
Yellow great battalions of them
Blowing in the breeze.

Let others love the Downs best (not
me, for I hate hill climbing) and re-
call them with the passion in Elizabeth
Browning's lines:

My own hills! Are you 'ware of me, my
hills,
How I burn toward you? Do you feel to-
night
The urgency and yearning of my soul
As sleeping mothers feel the suckling babe
And smile? . . . Still ye go
Your own determined, calm, indifferent
way
Toward sunrise, shade by shade, and
light by light.

But I honour their gentle beauty by
eating the mutton praised by Dudeney,
Mr. Kipling's old shepherd: 'That's
Southdown thyme which makes our
Southdown mutton beyond compare,
and my mother told me 'twill cure
anything except broken hearts or
necks, I forget which' . . . As I was
going to say before these passages in-
sisted on being quoted, some of the
poets who have written most beauti-
fully about Sussex were born far be-
yond its green or grey horizons. Mr.
Kipling and Mr. Hilaire Belloc are not
Sussex men save by adoption; neither
was Swinburne nor Tennyson, with
his fair prospect of 'Green Sussex
fading into blue, With one grey

glimpse of sea.' Shelley and Collins, who were Sussex born and bred, never cared to celebrate the loveliness of the earth out of which they were subtly wrought. The truth is that Sussex, so strong in her age-long patience, has power to take in the stranger and make him a true South Saxon, even to the extent of adopting the Sussex crest of a pig couchant with the motto 'I wun't be druv.' So that stubborn persons, such as you and I and you know who, are easily penned in the Sussex pound—why, even the most exquisite gentleman of us all has become a willing captive there, as the jolly old song testifies:

The Devil come to Sussex dunn a-many
year ago,
He run up an' down the county—here an'
there an' to an' fro,
He saw the land was sweet an' fair, an'
fine in every way,
Says he, I'll settle here for life—you'll
find un there to-day!

This discourse has been suggested by '*Kipling's Sussex*.* by R. Thurston Hopkins, and by the March-April number of the *Poetry Review* (Sussex Number), which opens with a delightful essay on 'Sussex and the Poets,' by H. M. Walbrook, and contains a little anthology of new Sussex poems, which smells sweet as a bunch of newly-gathered primroses. Mr. Kipling, I think, must rank as the chief of The Sussex Poets. His Hobden is the best Sussex labourer in all fiction, not excepting Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith's stories. Here is his portrait from 'The Land':

Not for any beast that burrows, not for
any bird that flies,
Would I lose his large, sound counsel,
miss his keen amending eyes.

*Simpkin, Marshall, 12s. 6d. net.

He is bailiff, woodman, wheelwright, field-
surveyor, engineer,
And if flagrantly a poacher—'tain't for
me to interfere.

He is a lineal descendant of the silent toiler, who went on with his ploughing all day while the Battle of Hastings was being fought beyond the next ridge, but helped the white-handed, gold-haired Queen to find Harold's body in the darkness—it was not from the sea, so near at hand, that the salt savour in the air came and the strange, confused moaning that ceased only at sunrise! Hobden, like his ancestor, has a fine loyalty to beer, noble beer; he would never have admitted that a chap could get drunk on ale, any more than the Sussex policeman did when he had to *carry* a beer-drinker to the police station and yet gave evidence next morning to the effect that the prisoner 'was noways tossicated, but only a-concerned a leetle in liquor.' Why, in Sussex the habitual drunkard (on beer) is spoken of as a man who takes 'half-a-pint other-while.' And to take but one appropriate quotation (passing over Mr. Belloc, who can sing such a lusty stave in honour of brown liquid bread), did not a son of Rye, John Fletcher, majestically enjoin beer-drinking as a duty to God and man?

Drink to-day and drown all sorrow,
You shall perhaps not do it to-morrow;
Best, while you have it, use your breath:
There is no drinking after death.

No wonder that Mr. Belloc exclaims:

I will gather and carefully make my
friends
Of the men of the Sussex Weald

seeing in them incarnations of that
Spirit of the Downs, which also in-

spired this whimsical, heart-teasing
couplet from a trench in Flanders:

And we assault in an hour, and it's a silly
thing:
I can't forget the lane that goes from
Steyning to the Ring.

Let me pass over the famous Sussex
poets (among them Jasper Mayne,
made Archdeacon of Chichester at the
Restoration, who had the sombre in-
tensity of Donne at times), and look
at the little anthology of young singers
and makers in the *Poetry Review*.
Alas! that it is impossible to quote
them all. The various aspects of
Sussex scenery are praised in golden
numbers; not so Brighton, which is

really London against a countryside
background, forgotten in her sedate
magnificence:

Can there be yet a still more lovely thing
Than this steep street in the grey
Georgian town,
So steep it reaches halfway to the sky,
Having been once a sheep-track on a
Down?

It is the Downs, however, that domi-
nate each song of life or love or death,
and so let us close on a heavenly ca-
dence with this epigram:

O green, translucent Downs!
Soft-shadowed, lifted high!
What magic fills you, that you stand,
Untouched by Time's relentless hand,
As God first breathed you on the morn-
ing sky?

BAD 'CESS TO THE WIDOWS AN' ALL!

BY ROSAMOND LANGBRIDGE

From *The Manchester Guardian*

(RADICAL LIBERAL DAILY)

PERHAPS it was because, the night
before, a gay laddo had whistled at the
Widow Healy as he passed her on the
road, and, when she looked back at
him, had blown her an impertinent
kiss; or maybe it was the glory-flare
of the gorse which glimmered through
the dusk that night and spoke to her
of the yellow sunshine of life; or else
it was the reminiscent scent of the
gorse which put back the clock of her
mind to her courting days with Healy
in that very lane. Whatever it was,
after an hour of steady reflection she
raised a defiant head, and with one
shake of her shoulders shook off the
weight of forty dull years from her
shawl, and with it her twenty years'
record of sobriety in Ballybeg. She

decided that twenty good years of her
life had been wasted without courters,
and that courters, therefore, she must
have.

It was perhaps unfortunate, if not
untypical of widows, that her pre-
monitory choice fell on a 'promised'
boy. It was partly that her instinct
sensed a flaw of softness in James
Hickey; partly that between herself
and Delia Meahan, his promised wife,
there had always existed an obscure
competitive dislike.

So she kept her door open of an
evening till that hour when young
Hickey was passing by alone. Mrs.
Healy had cut her finger deeply the
day before, and as James lunged
heavily toward her, the very flower of
ingenuity bloomed suddenly in her