

Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet
president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk

August 2016

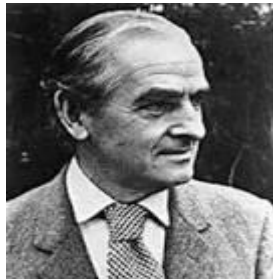
The Poetry of Rural Suffolk: George Ewart Evans (1909- 1988)

The man who did more than any other to preserve the speech and traditions of rural Suffolk was actually born in the mining town of Abercynon in South Wales. His father was a grocer and George was acutely aware of the terrible hardships his community had to bear, particularly during the years of the Depression. He experienced the grief of his fellow townsmen in the aftermath of the all too frequent mining disasters. His father lost his grocer's shop and was made bankrupt. This experience of considerable financial inequality and social injustice led to his life-long believe that only Communism could heal the deep seated ills of society.

After graduating from University College in Cardiff with a degree in Classics with a teaching certificate, he was unemployed for a few years. During this period, he gained some irregular income from his athletic prowess: he was a rugby player and a sprinter. He then retrained in order to gain a qualification as a teacher of physical education. This enabled him to gain a post at the experimental Sawston Village College in Cambridgeshire which was founded by Henry Morris. Morris believed that by establishing a secondary school which would involve, in some respect, every member of the rural community, it would help prevent the decline of village life which was beginning to increase in the 1930's and was to increase still more after the Second World War. This left a deep impression

on George who was keen to revitalize village life in an age when more and more people were moving, often against their will, to urban environments in order to find employment. It was at this school that George met the woman who was to be his wife, Florence Ellen Knappet who was a teacher and a Quaker.

During the Second World War, he joined the RAF but he was never sent abroad due to his hearing problems which affected him all his life. It's ironic that the man who spent countless hours listening to tales of the past should have suffered from partial deafness. However, the intentness of his listening more than made up for his disability.



After the war, George taught in a school in London but he soon he came to long for the countryside and in 1948, he moved to Blaxhall in Suffolk where his wife had been appointed as the village school mistress. When he assisted with a Festival of Britain exhibition in 1951, he found that the older people who had lived through a revolution in agricultural practices had an overwhelming desire to talk about their memories of the old methods of farming which had changed little in centuries when the horse was at the heart of farming life. George was not only struck by

what they said but with the way in which they said it.



The language they used was itself a form of poetry with its almost tactile nature; its vivid visual imagery and the use of words which were no longer heard in many other parts of rural Britain and never heard among city dwellers. Those Suffolk farm workers used, in his own words: *images that a listener finds so easy to translate and give visual form to as he concentrates on what the speaker describes.*



George's great insight was that the revolution in farming practice had not only permanently altered the physical aspects of life, it had permanently altered people's relationship with language with implications for poetry and for religion. A disciple of Ewart Evans, Neil Lanham later wrote: . . . *across the region a*

wealth of wisdom has been passed down by word of mouth. These stories and songs are our heritage and should be treasured. They are our traditional way of passing wisdom. Modern speech passes little more than information.

Anyone looking for *information* in a poem is bound to be disappointed and anyone looking to find *information* in the greatest poem in English Literature, the King James Bible, is bound to be equally disappointed. To read the Bible as it were a series of newspaper account of events has led to one absurdity after another.

After years of searching for something to write about, George came to feel that the most valuable use of his talents was to record the dialect, along with the customs, traditions, folklore and rural customs before they disappeared forever. With his trusty tape recorder, George travelled around the county talking and, above all else, listening to older people before their rich cultural heritage died with them. In an age when older people were coming to be more and more disregarded, he treated them with the greatest respect by attending closely to what they had to say of their past.

Those recordings were first used as the basis for radio programmes but they later came to be used as the basis for books, beginning with *Ask The Fellows Who Cut The Hay*. The title of this book is taken from a translation of a Chinese poem by Ezra Pound:

*From a different line of work, my
colleagues,
I bring you an idea. You smirk,
It's in the line of duty. Wipe that
smile, and
as our grandfathers used to say:
Ask the fellows who cut the hay.*

In the words of a friend, George had the extraordinary ability to: *persuade seemingly ordinary people to talk naturally, candidly and vividly about their lives and their thoughts and understanding how significant these voices were.*

Ewart Evans regarded himself more as a creative artist than a mere chronicler of the past. Like Picasso or Stravinsky, he returned to what had for so been dismissed as the merely primitive to find guidance in how to express the present.

A whole series of books followed *Ask The Fellows Who Cut The Hay*. In George's own words: *the main components of history are not things but people.* However, things are transformed by the hands of those who have used them, they bear the imprints of human lives. Suffolk's most important cultural institution, The Museum Of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket, which has an entire room devoted to the life and work of George Ewart Ewans, has brought together the houses, farming tools, ancient crafts, domestic interiors and objects which have shaped rural life in Suffolk for generations. To run your fingers across the handle of a hay rake or pitch fork is reach out your hand to those who have gone and find it held.



George was fascinated by all the mystical lore country people associated with hares and horses and with so much else that we now dismiss as *natural phenomena*. The line between the natural and the magical used to be much less clear cut and perhaps it is modern people who are the poorer for it. He asked: *Is all this magical and mystical stuff worth recording or as I have often been asked myself: 'Do you really believe in it?' But these questions miss the point. The relevant question should be: 'Did the participants, the horsemen themselves, really believe in it? The answer is emphatically, 'Yes, they did!' It was through believing in it implicitly that they got their power and their results.*

George died in the winter of 1988. No other writer has done more to enrich our appreciation of Suffolk's past and the poetry of its now silenced people.



I'm intending to arrange an evening of poetry, music and storytelling in the wonderful setting of the Museum Of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket. Anyone who has a poem, song or story which has been inspired by Suffolk's rich rural past which they'd like to perform on the evening should get in touch with me. I look forward to hearing from you.