

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



The Cotswold Farmers

By John Drinkwater

Sometimes the ghosts forgotten go
Along the hill-top way,
And with long scythes of silver mow
Meadows of moonlit hay,
Until the cocks of Cotswold crow
The coming of the day.

There's Tony Turkletob who died
When he could drink no more,
And Uncle Heritage, the pride
of eighteen-twenty-four,
And Ebenezer Barleytide,
And others half a score.

They fold in phantom pens, and plough
Furrows without a share,
And one will milk a faery cow,
And one will stare and stare,
And whistle ghostly tunes that now
Are not sung anywhere.

The moon goes down on Oakridge lea,
The other world's astir,
The Cotswold Farmers silently
Go back to sepulchre,
The sleeping watchdogs wake, and see
No ghostly harvester.

Favourite Poem cont.

For homework – ‘write an appreciation of this poem’. My heart sank. I knew I liked it, but how to put it into words? Sixty years later, I can explain. The poem’s subject matter speaks to my interests: the past, farming, ghosts.

I admire the way Drinkwater uses sounds to conjure up the ghostly presences on a Cotswold hill top. Sibilants – *scythes of silver, whistle ghostly* – tell of other-worldly sights as the long-dead farmers go about their daily work. His use of alliteration in many lines mimics the three alliterative stresses of Old English poetry, contributing to the strong sense of the past:

*ghosts forgotten go
scythes of silver
cocks of Cotswold crow*

I can find only three words not derived from Old English and the first lines of the third verse are a triumph of alliteration – *they fold in phantom pens and plough / Furrows...*

To the eye, these are repeated Ps. but to the ear, repeated Fs’

I find the last verse disappointing. The skilful phrases of the supernatural in the first three verses are not echoed in the final verse. It is more prosaic, as reality is restored, but lacks the same facility with language.

John Drinkwater was born in 1882 in Leytonstone, the son of a schoolmaster. In a varied career, he was an actor, playwright, editor and poet. Before World War One, he was part of the group known as the Dymock Poets, which included Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas and Lascelles Abercrombie. After the deaths of Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas, the Dymock Poets went their separate ways, although their poetry remained popular.

He died in 1937.

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