A Breath of Fresh Air – An Idyll

F. C. Ball

Published in 1961, this is an autobiographical account of life in Telham in the years immediately before and during World War I, seen through a child's eyes – albeit one given to wry adult asides. To the surprise of their Hastings neighbours, the Hopewells abandon modernity, exemplified by streets with gaslight and tram rails, for a tied cottage on the Telham estate of the widowed "Old Gal" and her two daughters, one an enthusiastic horsewoman and the other a chronic invalid. Mr. Hopewell had just been employed as their gardener.

The author describes a hard rural life where demanding physical labour in the open air is rewarded with just about enough to live on and the scope for garnering material possessions is limited. Invited to tea with a neighbouring family, the Hopewells note that the hostess's husband must wait for her to finish imbibing before he takes his turn of one of their few teacups. Pressure from the Old Gal converts the Hopewells to churchgoers affording F.C.Ball a broader canvas on which to portray a community which seems generally reconciled to its lot and the existing social hierarchy. The author's christening of the dramatis personae in the style of Bunyan's" Pilgrim's Progress" hints at a more subversive undercurrent to the narrative as the reader sees the Hopewells, the Playfairs, the Reverend Grantus, Mrs. Pryer, Miss Mercy and even a Miss Antrope step on stage.

The introspective, parochial rhythm of Telham life is convulsed by the advent of War in 1914 and the villagers' minds are forcefully turned to distant theatres of conflict. There is near unanimous support for the War and familiar tales of enthusiastic recruits, inevitably some underage. The more tentative are bullied into enlisting by Telham's cohort of martial females although white feathers do not feature in this discourse. Historians always emphasise this was total war and we learn of an unsung equine conscription of draught and hunting horses and the decimation of woodland to strengthen the sinews of war.

A huge influx of Canadian troops threatens to engulf local womanhood in a testosterone tsunami with the teacher, Miss Noman, taking to striding around affecting a markedly military bearing and our boy narrator recording that nocturnal expeditions in the fields were fraught with the danger of trampling on the supine forms of the freshly inamorati. Uncle Cyril demonstrates how the militarisation of society can be an engine of social mobility as, following his return to Telham on leave, commissioned from the ranks to become an officer

in the Royal Flying Corps, he is inundated with invitations to tea in various “big houses” and young women conversing with him seem ever on the brink of swooning.

At a more granular level the roll call of the victims lengthens; the dead, the amputees, the post-traumatic stress cases – particularly devastating where employment and housing hinge on being physically able to do hard manual work. The telegram boy on his bike becomes a contemporary manifestation of the Angel of Death. Conscription, presented as engaging “our full strength”, is introduced and there is a dawning awareness of “safe billets” within the military. Some thrive in Blighty; scams where builders are charged with upgrading properties to engineer rent increases, Grandpa the cynic has a highly remunerative job in Woolwich Arsenal but his profligate open-handedness in the “Blackhorse” elicits violent resentment rather than gratitude. Miss Antrope is born again as a Christian anti-war activist and, as if industrialised mass slaughter on the battlefields was not calamitous enough, 1918 saw the arrival of the Spanish flu, an influenza pandemic which cut swathes through vulnerable populations.

At the end of the year the nation’s church bells ring out to acclaim Victory and the surviving warriors return slowly to Telham. Mr. Hopewell is one of the last. Although his posting to India meant he did not see active service, he has a legacy of an indolent tropical disease and a pronounced yellow cast to his features. As the curtain falls on the Hopewells’ Telham sojourn and they set off for Hastings the patriarch, possibly taking his cue from Bunyan’s Pilgrim encourages the family with the observation “but we keep gooin’ “.

This work can be read as a primary source account of rural working-class life in war and peace in the opening decades of the 20th century but a vignette in the closing chapters unmasks the rancour underlying the pleasant pastoral resonance of the title. It was published in the same year as Alan Clark’s blistering attack on the High Command of Britain’s Great War army, “The Donkeys”, and the birth of savagely satirical TV programmes; so, iconoclasm was very much in the air. The author was singlehandedly responsible for restoring the full version of the Hastings-set “Ragged Trousered Philanthropists” by the splenetic Irish socialist who wrote as Robert Tressell and a sympathy with Tressell’s ideals seems to me likely. The faux-naïf narrative style and the ruminations of F.C. Ball as a maturing adolescent reinforce my view that this book is basically a social satire.

At whatever level the B.D.H.S. membership might choose to interpret it; I believe this work merits being more widely read locally.

Bill Doherty