

Please cite the Published Version

Bishop, N (2015) Ruralism, Masculinity, and National Identity: The Rambling Clerk in Fiction, 1900–1940. *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (3). pp. 654-678. ISSN 0021-9371

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2015.57>

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (CUP)

Version: Accepted Version

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Journal of British Studies

Volume 54, no. 3 (July 2015)

Bishop

Ruralism, Masculinity, and National Identity: The Rambling Clerk in Fiction, 1900–1940

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Journal of British Studies 54:3 (July 2015): ●●●-●●●

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Ruralism, Masculinity, and National Identity: The Rambling Clerk in Fiction, 1900–1940

In 1934, Victor Canning published the first of what would become a series of novels about Mr. Edgar Finchley. The inimitable hero of this popular middlebrow series was, like Canning, a clerk—a “neatly clad, harmless-looking little man.”¹ In *Mr. Finchley Discovers His England*, we read of the adventures that transform this meek “little” clerk into a rugged and masculine explorer. This discovery of “his” England offers the reader two parallel journeys; one, into the identity of the male city clerk; the second, into the heart of England itself. The novel celebrates the pinnacle of two distinct yet connected movements: a genre I loosely term “clerkly literature” and emergent interest in rambling as a leisure pursuit. This article explores the proliferation of “neatly clad, harmless-looking little [men]” in middlebrow British fiction of the early twentieth century, in order to understand the cultural implications of the male clerk’s forays into the rural landscape. In doing so, it contributes to discussions about masculinity, class, leisure, heritage, and the role of landscape in the formation of national identity. Recent historiography focuses on the clerk in what is deemed

¹ Victor Canning, *Mr. Finchley Discovers His England* (London, 1972), 2.

his “natural” habitat—the office.² This article will place the clerk in the English countryside, at a moment when he, like many others, sought peace and solitude from frenetic city life.

The clerkly type became a crucial literary “everyman” during this period; commented on in literature as varied as George Gissing’s novels, T. S. Eliot’s poetry, and George Orwell’s works. He also became the unlikely protagonist of what this article describes as “clerical fiction,” of which narratives involving the “ramble” are a subgenre. The literary historian, Jonathan Wild dates the earliest blueprint of the genre to G. H. Lewes’s novel *Ranthorpe* (1847), which follows the trials and tribulations of the titular clerk.³ Clerical fiction explicitly focuses on the experiences of a central clerk-figure, providing a realist description of a humdrum, yet often pathos-filled, life of work at the office and family in the suburbs. The central thematic concerns of the genre include the increasing mechanisation of office work, the instability of social status, financial difficulties, suburban snobbery, domesticated masculinities, and the desire, often on the part of aspiring writers, to leave clerical careers. Typical examples of clerical texts include George and Weedon Grossmith’s *Diary of a Nobody* (1892), Arnold Bennett’s *A Man from the North* (1898), Shan Bullock’s *Robert Thorne* (1907) and *Mr. Ruby Jumps the Tracks* (1917), Julian Forest’s *The Wooden Angel* (1938),⁴ and George Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936). Outside of works that focus on the male clerical protagonist solely, there are also identifiable clerkly narratives within the novels of George Gissing, P. G. Wodehouse, E. M. Forster, and Norman Collins, as well as those that follow the traits of the genre, but explore the lives of other lower middle-class figures—notably the drapers, shop assistants, and pupil teachers of H. G. Wells’s works.

² Michael Heller, *London Clerical Workers 1880–1914: Development of the Labour Market* (London, 2011); F. D. Klingender, *The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain* (London, 1935); David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (Oxford, 1969); Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester, 1976); Jonathan Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880–1939* (Basingstoke, 2006).

³ Wild, *Rise of the Office Clerk*, 12.

⁴ Julian Forest was a pseudonym of Victor Canning.

Note, that with the exception of the Grossmiths, all of the above-mentioned authors had experience being a clerk or engaging with some other type of clerkly (lower middle-class) work.⁵

In literature, the clerk is a figure who is not only identifiably lower middle class, but represents the whole lower middle class. In *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), John Carey reiterates the oft-cited argument of W. H. Crosland that “the clerk” had “virtually come to constitute society.”⁶ Mark Clapson likewise calls the term “clerk” a “pejorative catch-all term” for the lower middle classes, just as Geoffrey Crossick states in the opening of *The Lower Middle Class in Britain* (1977): “I shall make no apology in what follows for concentrating on the clerk as a representative example of the lower middle classes.”⁷ There is a certain fluidity in this article when discussing authors and characters who are “clerks,” “clerkly,” or “clerkish,” a fluidity that mirrors the flexibility of the clerical genre.

It is within this genre that ramble fiction takes form. Sometimes the ramble is a discrete event within a broader clerical novel but, more often, a clerical novel takes the clerk and captures the changes that transpire during his annual holiday, which is oftentimes a

⁵ This article is based on the works of former clerks-turned-writers, although there are a few notable exceptions that demonstrate the widespread popularity of both the clerical novel format and the ramble narrative. See, for instance, later references to Francis Brett Young’s *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom* (1940). Canning was a clerk, as were Shan Bullock, Arnold Bennett and Jerome K. Jerome; E. M. Forster was a tutor for a while, as was George Gissing; George Orwell was a bookshop assistant, and H. G. Wells a draper.

⁶ John Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (London, 1992), 58.

⁷ Mark Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Worlds: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Post-War England* (Manchester, 1998), 6; Geoffrey Crossick, ed., *The Lower Middle Class in Britain: 1870–1914* (London, 1977), 97.

ramble through the rural countryside. Rambling, in this context, is not an activity that takes place within a more formal club setting.⁸ The earliest clerk-ramblers predate the formalization of the leisure industry—the late nineteenth-century campaign to get “back to the land” was still in its infancy—and they travelled alone. It should be added that the clerk-rambler was a London phenomenon, and it was the countryside of the south of England to which he escaped, notably during the two-week holiday given to nearly all clerks by the beginning of the twentieth century. It is in a tour through Germany, however, that we find the clearest definition of the English Rambler of this period, as outlined in former clerk Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men on the Bummel* (1900):

“A ‘Bummel,’” I explained, “I should describe as a journey, long or short, without an end; the only thing regulating it being the necessity of getting back within a given time to the point from which one started. Sometimes it is through busy streets, and sometimes through the fields and lanes; sometimes we can be spared for a few hours, and sometimes for a few days. . . . We nod and smile to many as we pass; with some we stop and talk awhile; and with a few we walk a little way. We have been much interested, and often a little tired. But on the whole we have had a pleasant time, and are sorry when ’tis over.”⁹

Jerome’s text provides a perfect summation of the type of literature that this article will discuss. Part travelogue, part anecdote, and with much fiction thrown in, *Three Men in a Bummel* highlights both the stylistic tropes and general mood of what may be called “ramble

⁸ See, for instance, discussions about organizations such as the Manchester YMCA Rambling Club, the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers, and the Ramblers’ Association in David Prynne’s “The Clarion Clubs, Rambling and the Holiday Associations in Britain since the 1890s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no.2/3 (July 1976): 65–77.

⁹ Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men on the Bummel* (London, 1994), 207.

literature.” The clerical ramble is generally constructed in both content and form as a pilgrimage to medieval sites and also a style and tradition of writing, following in the literary footsteps of early travel writers such as William Cobbett and Daniel Defoe. From the turn of the twentieth century, this rambling clerk figure became fictionalized in the works of middlebrow clerks-turned-authors like Canning before being adopted by a wider array of writers in the decades leading up to the Second World War. Across fiction, the ramble was presented as an opportunity for further self-education for men who benefitted from the new Board schools, as well as an expression of joy at leaving the suburbs, and its social obligations and constraints. These texts were written to encourage other young clerks to partake in similar journeys and, in this mission, they were supported by a number of nonfiction guides as well as a growing interest in nature writing. These guides were intended to instruct the growing army of clerks to appreciate the natural world in a bid to not only engage physically with the landscape in order to counter the effects of cramped and sedentary working conditions, but also to connect with the history of the country, thus forging an intimacy with a particular version of the nation’s past. This article offers a new perspective on the southern, rambling clerk, which complements work on northern clerk-hikers as well as broader histories of recreational rambling and walking.¹⁰ I place the clerk at the center of a discourse of national identity, particularly as the variant of Englishness propounded by these clerk-authors was adopted more broadly in fictional rambles written by nonclerical authors from the 1930s—Francis Brett Young’s *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom* (1940) provides one such instance. This raises interesting questions regarding the position of the clerk within society, and the readiness with which authors from diverse backgrounds saw the clerk as symbolic of a genre.

There are three distinct phases of clerkly literature. It first emerged in 1859, when the “Manchester Clerk” published his account of a ramble taken during a fortnight’s holiday, and

¹⁰ See Melanie Tebbutt, “Rambling and Manly Identity in Derbyshire’s Dark Peak, 1880s–1920s,” *Historical Journal* 49 (2006): 1125–53; Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London, 2001).

Thomas Hughes published his literary memorial to the White Horse monument.¹¹ One was anecdotal and the other fictional, but both illustrate the vibrant historical appetite for rural England, and are centered on a clerk—Hughes’s protagonist is Richard Easy, a young office worker. As the nineteenth century came to a close, the clerk-rambler was at the heart of novels by H. G. Wells, George Gissing, and Jerome K. Jerome—all of whom originated from the “clerkly classes.”¹² A second peak of clerkly literature occurred around 1910, when Jeffery Farnol, proto-modernist E. M. Forster, and Wells (once again) all explored the rambling lower middle classes in *The Broad Highway*, *Howards End*, and *The History of Mr. Polly*, respectively. Finally, the fictional rambling clerk re-emerges in 1934, the same year as J. B. Priestley’s *English Journey*, and on the back of a decade of so-called “nature writing” by authors such as H. V. Morton, W. H. Hudson, Stephen Graham, and Adrian Bell. In the first period, the lower middle classes dominated impressions about the rambler; after Hughes’s account, representations by middle-class authors were not particularly abundant. This second phase of clerkly literature is marked by an outpouring of material about the

¹¹ Manchester Clerk, *A Fortnight’s Ramble through some of the more beautiful and interesting counties of Old England* (Manchester, 1859); Thomas Hughes, *The Scouring of the White Horse: or, the long vacation of a London clerk* (London, 1859).

¹² H. G. Wells, *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900); George Gissing, *Mr. Brogden, City Clerk: A Queer Episode in His Life...* (1899); Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) and *Three Men on a Bummel* (1900).

clerkly Rambler; we see him featured in middlebrow fiction, travelogues,¹³ and in middle-class culture more broadly. Finally, in the 1930s, the clerk-author led the way. Canning's *Mr. Finchley*, a tale by a clerk about a clerk, was published in 1934, and was quickly followed by George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* (1938), in which Bowling, a lower middle-class insurance salesman, takes off on his own ramble to Lower Binfield. By 1940, the popular adventure writer Francis Brett Young published *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, which reads as a near rewriting of Canning's novel, and demonstrates the diffusion of the ramble genre across a broader social spectrum.¹⁴

There are points of similarity across these diverse periods. Focusing on those similarities helps us to understand the long-lasting impulse towards arcadia that is evoked during periods of socio-historic instability. For instance, fin-de-siècle unease about mass

¹³ See, for example, Robert Weir Brown, *Kenna's Kingdom, a Ramble Through Kingly Kensington* (London, 1881); Harry Brittain, *Rambles in East Anglia: or, Holiday Excursions Among Rivers and Broads* (London, 1890); Mark Knights, *Peeps at the Past: or, Rambles Among Norfolk Antiquities* (London, 1892); John Kirby Hedges, *A Short History of Wallingford: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, to which is added rambles in the neighbourhood* (Wallingford, 1893); George Edward Tasker, *Country Rambles... Romford, Hornchurch and Upminster* (Illford, 1911); Anthony Collett, *Country Rambles round London* (London, 1912); J. Charles Cox, *Rambles in Kent* (London, 1913); Walter Gawthorp, *By London's City Walls* (London, 1925); S. P. Mais, *Southern Rambles for Londoners* (London, 1936); and *England's Pleasance* (London, 1935). Note the parity of these "waves" within nonfiction travelogue also.

¹⁴ It is interesting to chart the social progression of these protagonists as middle-class authors appropriated the form. Canning is a clerk; Bowling is a traveling salesman; and Mr. Lucton, Brett Young's Rambler, is a manager. Regardless of these incremental promotions, they all conform to the same character traits.

urbanization, as well as the contested forms of masculinity evoked during the Oscar Wilde case, influenced the desire for a relationship with the rural landscape that was marked by male domination, hence the increased popularity of cycling, rambling, and imperial travel. Likewise, the change in mood in 1910 that Virginia Woolf famously remarked on coincided with concerns raised by Forster in *Howards End* about the inevitability of war with Germany and the further entrenchment of a strong national identity.¹⁵ In the 1930s, Jerry-built suburban developments sprawling out into the Edenic landscape were causing alarm.¹⁶ From this point onwards, however, I will structure my discussion of clerical fiction thematically, rather than by their position in relation to these three stages. This does not undermine the importance of historical context within these novels, but rather demonstrates the similarities of the modes of expression during varied periods of tension or anxiety. The “clerical ramble” subgenre remains largely unchanged in terms of content, character, and setting, but is a fixed category of literature called upon when circumstance required it.¹⁷ Most important is the idea that whenever developments are made, it is the rambling clerk who stands—walking stick in hand—at the gateway to the heart of England and functions as an iconic figure in the association between the southern rural idyll and the dominant idea of “Englishness.”

The Rural Tradition

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London, 1924), 4.

¹⁶ Peter Mandler also notes the growth of the Labour Party in the 1930s and their dependence on Ruskinian doctrine as a crucial aspect of conservatism and open access movements. Peter Mandler, “Politics and the English Landscape since the First World War,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (1992): 459-476, 461.

¹⁷ As one instance, see the re-publication of Victor Canning’s *Everyman’s England* (1936) in 2011, at the height of a burgeoning interest in “nature writing”—a genre situated in a context dominated by discussions of climate change.

The clerk-rambler was not, of course, the first figure in the English literary tradition to idealize rural England. Seeing England as an idyll can be traced as far back as Edmund Spenser's "The Shepheardes Calendar" (1579), John Milton's "Comus" (1634), and later, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1849); in all, Virgilian pastoral and Edenic visions play a major part. Rebecca Solnit, amongst others, traces the roots of a distinctly English pastoral to the domestic landscape design of the eighteenth century—a landscape from which the lower classes were naturally socially exempt. Once the gardens of landowners progressed from formal ordering to rolling, naturalized landscapes, the idea of using this landscape as a space for walking developed quickly and was adopted as a central motif of the Romantic movement.¹⁸ William Wordsworth, for example, famously employed "his legs as an instrument of philosophy" and, in doing so, witnessed the democratic nature of walking. Across private spaces and open terrain, the appreciation of both landscape and walking became central to English literary culture.¹⁹

For many, of course, the countryside was far from the cities in which they lived and worked, hence the enjoyment of literary accounts of the rural. Mr. Dalglish, Dent's general editor, commented in 1932:

[W]hen lack of leisure and short days, or inclement weather, or illness confine to the arm-chair and the fireside, with the Open-Air Library the exhilaration of the wide spaces may still be experienced, and the mind, less trammelled than the body, may wander happily in company with the companion most suited to his mood.²⁰

¹⁸ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 81–103.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰ J. M. Dent, *The House of Dent 1888–1938* (London, 1938), 292.

By the 1930s, eighty percent of the English population lived in an urban environment and “armchair tourism,” as John Taylor calls it, had never been so popular.²¹ The growth in rural writing at this time was supported, as Malcolm Chase argues, by an ever-growing publishing industry; in fact, as he observes, “the opening-up of the publishing market mirrored the opening-up of the countryside itself.”²² Because of this, the stories of the clerk-rambler were instrumental in creating a market for writing about the rural landscape; these stories were enthusiastically sold to a static, urban readership, and resulted in the expansion of this market.

Various publishers strove to meet the demands of urban readers for travelogues, nonfiction guides to nature, and rural literature. Dent had launched their Open-Air Library featuring popular nature authors such as W. H. Hudson, E. V. Lucas and Richard Jefferies by 1908, their Wayfarer’s Library in 1913, and their detailed Everyman’s guides to the British counties in 1915. By 1926, other publishers had followed suit. G. Bell & Sons created a “Pocket Guide” series, while Methuen & Co. had a “Little Guides” range of sixty volumes, with titles such as “Pocketable Guides to the Counties of England and Wales and to Well-known Districts at Home and Abroad,” available at 4s. Longman’s “English Heritage” series began in 1929, and in 1930 Batsford developed “English Life,” which included volumes on “the countryside, Old English household life, inns, villages, and cottages.”²³ The pricing of

²¹ Peter Mandler, “Against ‘Englishness’: English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850–1940,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997), 160; John Taylor, *A Dream of England: Landscape, Photography and the Tourist’s Imagination* (Manchester, 1994), 4.

²² Malcolm Chase, “This is no claptrap: this is our heritage,” in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, ed. Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw (Manchester, 1989), 129.

²³ Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit: 1850–1980* (Cambridge, 1981), 73.

these collections created a readership largely made up of the suburban lower middle classes—the clerical class, if you will.

Coinciding with these publishing developments, the Edwardian period saw the cultivation of a particularly nostalgic construct of rurality defined by the term “countryside”—a term which, as G.E. Mingay points out, the poet John Betjeman dubbed ““a delightful suburbanism.””²⁴ Betjeman was mocking the notion of moving to the suburbs in order to be closer to the countryside during a period when the suburban sprawl undermined any pretensions towards the natural landscape. Like Dent’s editor, however, Betjeman also suggests that the English countryside was most extolled by those who were not immersed in it, and who instead could enjoy its beauty and tranquillity temporarily without facing the hardships of a demanding rural life. During the First World War it was an idealized version of this life that was presented as the home to defend, regardless of the actual environment from which most ordinary soldiers had been enlisted. Everyman’s Library even released an anthology of rural writing entitled *The Old Country: A Book of Love and Praise of England* (1917) that was distributed by the YMCA amongst those serving.

The nostalgia for the Old Country remained an appealing one beyond wartime propaganda, as nature writing encouraged the association of the rural landscape with the concept of the “English home” throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century. We also see in this period the symbolic merging of this “home” with sentimentally-infused memories of the rural “holiday” across literature more generally. Witness, for example, poet laureate Alfred Austin’s *Haunts of Ancient Peace* (1902) in which the heroine seeks “washing-days, home-made jams, lavender bags, recitation of Gray’s *Elegy*, and morning and evening prayers” on a tour through England.²⁵ The “folk myth of the rural home” advocated by Austin’s sentimental *Haunts*, and which Peter Mandler argues was created in juxtaposition to early twentieth-century urbanism, is underwritten by the clerical ramble. The clerk’s two-week holiday was the perfect opportunity to reach out into the English countryside and create

²⁴ G. E. Mingay, *The Rural Idyll* (London, 1989), 17.

²⁵ Alfred Austin, as cited by Mandler, “Against ‘Englishness’,” 167.

memories not only of a bucolic retreat from the hum of the city and the restrictions of the suburb, but also to engage in the constructions of Englishness that carefully united the imagery of the rural south with national identity.²⁶

While the clerk's decision to use his holiday time for rambling appears, at first glance, to be fairly inconsequential, what actually occurred was a period of clerky reclassification. Upon returning home from a two-week ramble enthused by nature's muse, many clerks attempted to capture the essence of that journey in written form as both a celebration of the experience and a guide for others to follow. The clerk thus became a pioneer in the development of a new genre of literary nonfiction—a form of place writing. The clerk-rambler-writer took the real rural landscape, identified distinctly by factual references to specific locations, and used it as the inspiration for a semi-autobiographical novel. Many of these works are representative of what Robert Root calls the “nonfiction of place” in which the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is permeable; the setting drives the story and dominates the narrative, and thus the landscape ostensibly becomes the “fact” of the novel.²⁷ The descriptions given of the landscape offer, then, something like the lyrical evocation of place that is associated with the Romantic poets or, more recently, with the emerging genre of nature writing favored by contemporary writers such as Roger Deakin. In 1859, one of the earliest clerical rambles—the Manchester Clerk—demonstrates this lyric prose: “descending, in sweet intoxication of delight, we walked on to Chepstow, underneath a long and stately avenue of elms, glorified in the golden sunset;— and in the soft evening light, subdued and reposeful, filled with love of happy England.”²⁸

Perhaps the best known of these clerk-rambler-aspirant-writers is Leonard Bast, antihero in Forster's *Howards End*. Bast functions as a device for Forster to comment on this

²⁶ For further discussion of this fusion, see David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998).

²⁷ Robert Root, *Landscapes with Figures: the Nonfiction of Place* (Lincoln, NE., 2007), 1.

²⁸ Manchester Clerk, *Fortnight's Ramble*, 32.

emergent genre. Clerk Bast decides to leave his desk one evening and trudges out of London, desperate to find adventure in the Home Counties. He regales his new middle-class acquaintances—the Schlegel sisters—with the tale of his midnight ramble, in an attempt to demonstrate his deep-felt connection with nature. Bast’s disappointment at the reality of rambling (he finds it tiring, cold, and uninspiring) and his stammered explanation of an event that increasingly seems less idyllic and more socially dubious merely heightens tensions between them. Most critics have seen Bast’s ramble as further evidence of Forster’s belief in the limited intellectual capacity of the clerk and the dangers that urban life held for the deterioration of the national stock.²⁹ In doing so, they have taken Forster’s commentary on Bast’s midnight ramble at face value. According to contemporary critics, the Basterian suburban clerk felt little for the rural, whilst Forster’s idealization of agricultural laborers is usually read as an unflattering projection of contemporary—and oftentimes modernist—eugenicist thought:

Here men had been up since dawn. Their hours were ruled, not by a London office, but by the movements of the crops and the sun ... that they were men of the finest type only the sentimentalist can declare. But they kept to the life of daylight. They are England’s hope. Half-clothopper, half board-school prig, they can still throw back to a nobler stock, and breed yeomen.³⁰

²⁹ Jonathan Rose, for instance, suggests that Bast should have been a “mindless shepherd or ploughman like his grandfather” and comments on the “fragrant nostalgia for a rigid social hierarchy” within the novel. Peter Widdowson remarks on Forster’s “detachment [and] condescension” towards Bast, commenting that his “seedy body” must be destroyed.

Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (London, 2001), 402; Peter Widdowson, *E. M. Forster’s Howards End: Fiction as History* (Sussex, 1977), 72.

³⁰ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (Harmondsworth, 1961), 301.

Talk of “nobler stock” engages with contemporaneous eugenics that preached the value of rural life as opposed to a life in the city or suburbs. Charles Masterman, journalist, politician, and author of *The Condition of England* (1909), for instance, was an advocate of the “restoration not of a peasantry but of peasant values in the city.”³¹ Adventure-writer Henry Rider Haggard, whose works were vastly popular amongst the lower middle classes, was similarly convinced by the regenerative power of agricultural labor. In his opinion, it was the “man in the office . . . who neither toiled nor spun, [who] was the real danger”—as evidenced by the puny clerk who steals Gladys’s heart in *The Lost World* (1912).³² Haggard’s letters show that his solution was in the “recreation of a yeoman class, rooted in the soil and supported by the soil;” a connection with nature that was pushed to its limits within his imperial—and often survivalist—tales.³³ As Forster likewise suggests in his novel, it is the “yeoman” class and rural values that offer the best hope of social rejuvenation, and so the novel ends with Bast’s illegitimate baby playing in the newly cropped hay, saved from shame and degeneration by a return to the rural. While this reading of Forster as promoting pre-urban values seems straightforward enough, I would argue that Forster has his clearest moment of empathy for Bast in the latter’s desire to be immersed in a natural environment, and not merely for the sake of the race. Consider Bast’s description of his ramble:

“Have you ever read *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*?”

Margaret nodded.

“It’s a beautiful book. I wanted to get back to the Earth, don’t you see, like Richard does in the end. Or have you ever read Stevenson’s *Prince Otto*?”

Helen and Tibby moaned gently.

³¹ Mandler, “Against ‘Englishness,’” 162.

³² Alun Howkins, “Rider Haggard and rural England: an essay in literature and history,” in *The Imagined Past*, 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90.

“That’s another beautiful book. You get back to the Earth in that. I wanted – ” He mouthed affectedly. Then through the mists of culture came a hard fact, hard as a pebble.

“I walked all the Saturday night,” said Leonard. “I walked.”³⁴

Bast’s desire to “get back to the Earth” propels him into a world of twilight rambling across the North Downs in search of something of the beauty that he finds when he reads nature writers such as Richard Jefferies, Henry David Thoreau, and Robert Louis Stevenson—all heroes of Dent’s series. However, unlike the other clerk-ramblers in this article, Bast is not fulfilled by his ramble (“it wasn’t what you may call enjoyment”).³⁵

There are, it seems, a number of reasons why Bast does not enjoy his ramble. In particular, Forster implies Bast is overwhelmed by a literary tradition that suppresses any heartfelt connection with nature. As Wild puts it, Bast is “dazzled by the very beacons that he feels are illuminating his way.”³⁶ Bast cites Lucas’s *The Open Road: A Book for Wayfarers*, a 1899 collection of poems and short pieces that offers a romantic and sentimental version of pastoral travel as his inspiration, which has since been described as “part of an efflorescence of nostalgia-laden ‘country’ literature.”³⁷ Forster was familiar with much of this literary genre; Guy Cuthbertson draws attention to the number of illusory comments in the shaping of Leonard Bast as a caricature of Edward Thomas and Richard Jefferies.³⁸ Significant here,

³⁴ Forster, *Howards End*, 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁶ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 113.

³⁷ Wendy Joy Darby, *Landscape and Identity: Geographies of Nation and Class in England* (Oxford, 2000), 173.

³⁸ Guy Cuthbertson, “Leonard Bast and Edward Thomas,” *Notes and Queries* 52, no. 1 (2005), 87–89.

though, is the narrator's comment that "within [Bast's] cramped little mind dwelt something that was *greater* than Jefferies' books—the spirit that led Jefferies to write them."³⁹

Our clerk moves away from the language of degeneration and "the abyss,"⁴⁰ to talk instead of the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual revelations that could re-energize and revitalize the suburban commuter, renewing his spirit and helping him face the everyday realities of a clerky life. And, despite eugenicist discourse, this was not a product of social control; Forster cannot contrive Bast's ramble simply because he is forcing it from above. Arguably, the clerk's desire for rambling was organically forged; as Paul Readman argues of lower-class ruralism more generally, there was a "deeper, more direct sort of engagement" than talk of degeneration allows.⁴¹ It is, perhaps, in Margaret Schlegel's later defense of Bast that we see the "spirit" of rambling that Forster alludes to: "Let me explain exactly why we like this man. . . . Firstly, because he cares for physical adventure. . . . Secondly, he cares for something special in adventure. It is quickest to call that special something poetry."⁴²

The Self-Reflective Clerk

As Jan Marsh suggests, immersion in a rural environment was particularly attractive to those "for whom the elaborate social system of conventions and proprieties seemed suffocatingly restrictive, preventing the expression of natural feelings and simple pleasures."⁴³ For the clerk, the ramble could become an outlet for the pent-up frustrations of a life of "keeping up

³⁹ Forster, *Howards End*, 114, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴¹ Paul Readman, "Preserving the English Landscape," *Cultural and Social History* 5, no. 2 (2008), 207.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴³ Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: the Pastoral Impulse in England, 1880–1914* (London, 1982), 5.

with the Joneses.” Carey argues that many lower middle-class authors encouraged the “cult of the open road” because it enabled them to be freed from their “clerkly cares;” the feminisation and mechanisation of office work, economic decline of clerical workers, claustrophobia of domesticity, and poor social standing, as reflected in the satire of the clerk as pathetic “nobody” in the press.⁴⁴ Richard Jefferies’s *Open Air* (1908), the highly popular poetic collection of stories about the open road struck a chord with many of London’s workers, as one post office clerk states: “We shake the dust of the city from our feet, and turn southward to walk miles of turf and track, to laze in a hay-meadow, to eat sandwiches sitting on the low, rounded wall of an old churchyard.”⁴⁵

The other, more widely available opportunity for suburban escape was, of course, the seaside holiday. The clerk and his family were included in the mass migration to the seaside by the early twentieth century, and indeed, most clerical novels include a chapter or two spent in a suitably lower middle-class resort. But, as tourism studies scholars John Walton, Nigel Morgan, and Annette Pritchard assert, the seaside reinforced social divisions and accompanied acceptable behaviors, rather than providing an escape from suburban tensions.⁴⁶ Canning’s Mr. Finchley, for example, is desperate to visit Margate for his first holiday before he gets drawn into rambling. The seaside holiday—experienced when he lingers for two days

⁴⁴ This is a summation of the arguments posited by F. D. Klingender, David Lockwood, Gregory Anderson, and Jonathan Wild on the economic situation of clerk, and A. James Hammerton’s article on suburban domesticity: “Pooterism or Partnership? Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class, 1870–1920,” *Journal of British Studies* 38 (July 1999), 291–321; Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 146.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁶ See Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard, *Power and Politics at the Seaside: The Development of Devon’s Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Exeter, 1999), 29, as well as John Walton’s *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History, 1750-1914* (1983) and *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (2000).

in St Ives—does not fulfil Finchley because he feels pressured by social convention. As G. K. Chesterton glibly puts it in *Heretics* (1905): “if, as he expresses it, he goes to Ramsgate ‘for a change’, then he would have a much more romantic and even melodramatic change if he jumped over the wall into his neighbour’s garden.”⁴⁷

When Aldous Huxley likewise comments on the insipid nature of lower middle-class tourism in *Along the Road* (1925), he is analyzing the typically emulative and inauthentic behavior of a class he believes gains very little from travel. “[T]hey travel, not for travelling’s sake, but for convention’s,” he writes. “[T]hey set out, nourished on fables and fantastical hopes, to return, whether they avow it or not, disappointed.”⁴⁸ Huxley, like Forster, assumes that a class that is neither cognizant of the rural landscape nor educated, cannot read it “properly” or have a meaningful connection with it. There is, of course, a hint of Wordsworthian exclusivity here; as neither the tithed laborer, nor the middle-class poet, the clerk has no place but as a tourist trespasser. The clerical *rambler*, however, offers a very different narrative. Whilst at the beginning of his tale he is haunted by the dissatisfaction that comes from a strict social code, by the end the clerk has achieved a depth of connection with the pastoral south that makes him much more than a mere observer. He returns, not disappointed, but having experienced a romantic change in perspective that shapes his future in the suburban environment.

This transformation is most noticeable in the later fictional works as the post-war nostalgia for the southern landscape comes to its peak. If we consider, for instance, Canning’s *Mr. Finchley Discovers His England* (1934) and Brett Young’s *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom* (1940), we see that the clerk has to un-learn a whole set of clerkly habits before he can become a rambler. When we first meet Mr. Finchley he is sunning himself on a bench; as the owner of a new Bentley drives up, Finchley is very much a clerk—he is the “neatly clad, harmless-looking little man” whom the driver decides to entrust with keeping an eye on his precious car. When said car is stolen—with poor Finchley dozing on the backseat—the

⁴⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London, 1939), 187.

⁴⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Along the Road: Notes and Essays of a Tourist* (London, 1927), 9.

reality that he has become caught up with a member of the criminal classes offends his clerical sensibilities. Significantly, this is the point at which he becomes a rambler, as he first steals another car and then abandons it:

He could, of course, drive the car into the country and leave it, or even manoeuvre it into the river. He could give it away or abandon it in the car park. But all these solutions appeared to lack stability and neatness. He was a tidy man and to leave a car lying about a main road or cul-de-sac or blocking up a river ... well, it was not done and all the clerk in him was opposed to the idea.⁴⁹

The fact, then, that he does abandon the car (in the middle of the country) is a measure of just how un-clerkly Finchley the “rambler” has become.

Following Canning’s lead, in Brett Young’s *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom*, the titular businessman-turned-rambler is taken, at first, for a bank robber because he is spotted in a country pub with a hundred pound note. Lucton, who left his impressive suburban home in North Bromwich for an evening drive in his brand new Pearce-Tregaron motor car, carries with him an envelope containing “two thousand four hundred and twenty-six pounds” exactly—the proceeds of selling the small home that he has lived in for twenty years. Lucton has risen to the position of manager for a company that he started out in as junior clerk. The emotional turmoil he experiences on the sale of his house symbolizes his unwanted rise into the middle classes proper, a station that he resents as his family drifts apart, each chasing his or her own capitalist, consumerist dreams. Driving through a small ford in a thunderstorm and consequently crashing, Lucton realizes that he is lost some miles from home. At that point, having been “dislodged from the safe rut in which he was running,” he decides to fake amnesia and not return to North Bromwich. He plans to survive on the money in his pocket, but when he produces the envelope stuffed with hundred pound bills in order to pay for a pub supper, the barman suspects criminal activity and threatens to call the police. Not wanting to

⁴⁹ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 49.

explain himself and thus risking having to cut his impromptu ramble short, Lucton charges out of the pub before he can be arrested:

[N]ow that he came to look back upon the escapade, he knew he had enjoyed himself. It was a primitive, physical triumph: for the first time since the war he had proved the superiority of his wits and his limbs. After twenty years of smug respectability, he, Owen Lucton—whom the policemen on duty in Sackville Row saluted ... had run from the powers of the Law like a pickpocket and thereby satisfied some suppressed, mysterious craving for adventurous action.⁵⁰

Like Finchley, Lucton is inspired by his brush with the law, which seems to offer the hope of a freer existence; unbound by the constraints of respectability, they can both engage as never before with the countryside. That night Lucton sleeps, for the first time, in a barn. Upon waking, he becomes aware of a deep change: “though his limbs were slightly stiff from un wonted strains and exertions, there was even in them a feeling of ease and lightness, as though the very blood that ran through them had been cleansed.”⁵¹

Finchley, too, experiences rapid physical change once exposed to the countryside:

He cherished the unnatural contention of civilization that it was wrong to bathe without a costume. But the water called to him potently, and his collar gripped him like a warm pad about the neck. Why shouldn't he bathe? And having asked himself the question he could find no adequate objection save in his own cowardice. Was he afraid? The debate within himself lasted five minutes. He looked about for a spot to undress and, a few minutes later, stepped from the rear of a blackthorn as naked as the day of his birth. To any observer the pallid white of his flesh might have proved a

⁵⁰ Francis Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton's Freedom* (London, 1941), 86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

discordant element in the harmonies of blue and gold and brown. Mr. Finchley was not worrying about observers.⁵²

Here Finchley is at one both with nature and with himself in a way that is an unlikely outcome for a clerk who spent the past ten years working in a solicitor's office. Partway through his adventures, after he has been rambling for a few days, Finchley is asked to fill in for a missing sideshow worker. His response betrays his clerkly habit of mind: "Mr. Finchley gasped. Become a guy in a third-rate side-show! He, Edgar Finchley, solicitor's clerk! He looked down at his clothes. Did he look so disreputable? Did he look so very much like a tramp?"⁵³

This first mention of tramp-Finchley, as opposed to clerk-Finchley, is a significant moment. At the outset of the ramble, Finchley wants to enjoy himself, connect with nature, and experience a form of physical freedom, but he wants to do so whilst retaining an aura of respectability. When a peasant baker contradicts Finchley's statement that "it must be great to lead an open-air life" with a curt "you city folk who only see the country in the summer wouldn't like it in the winter," this partial engagement with rural life is challenged but not overridden, until Finchley meets a roaming parson.⁵⁴ This parson listens to Finchley's tales of rambling but criticizes the so-called adventure on the grounds that Finchley has always hidden behind the safety of his wallet. He suggests that, for Finchley to really forge a lasting connection with the landscape, he "must be penniless and ready to work for [his] food before [he can] understand the spirit which keeps these people wandering and living."⁵⁵ The parson adds that "to appreciate their love of the countryside, of this England, you have to see it as they do, as the country which gives them food, shelter and friendship." This overtly idealized

⁵² Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 53.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

vision of life for the rural poor nonetheless acts as a spur not only to Finchley but also to a wider array of clerical figures, fictional and otherwise. One of the first scenes that Lucton admires after his car crash in *Mr. Lucton's Freedom* is that of “slow rustic human shapes” amidst the “cottages of Cotswold stone and luminous half-timber,” “an old man, hobbling home on a stick [and] a woman, wearing a sun-bonnet, carrying buckets of milk or water attached to a yoke.” These figures simply add to the “village’s mysterious enchantment” as well as to the obviously Romantic influences on the clerk’s imagination.⁵⁶

Idealized rural characters constitute the scene as much as the landscape. The country tramp or vagrant, in particular, is a character frequently encountered by the clerk-rambler. The tramp-figure, to whom the roaming parson alludes, becomes the unequivocal figurehead of this image of rural Englishness. The hardships of a life exposed to the elements and dependent on the generosity of strangers is carefully avoided; instead, the reader is presented with a vibrant and bountiful vision of living off the land. Even Hudson, ardent nature-lover and prolific travel writer, romanticizes the “genial ruffian” in this way: “On a hot June morning near Lewes he met a ‘genial ruffian’ just out of gaol, swinging along with a bunch of yellow flag irises in his coat: he must indeed have been happy and seen all familiar things with a strange magical beauty in them.”⁵⁷ As Marsh argues, the figure of the tramp is often evocative of the ideology that “the savage may no longer be noble, but he has a mythical contentment not known to the rest of us.”⁵⁸ In many ways the tramp is portrayed as nature’s aristocrat—living off the abundant produce of the earth, connecting with the seasonal variations, and enjoying days free from responsibilities. Clerk-characters like Finchley and

⁵⁶ Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, 75.

⁵⁷ Ruth Tomalin, *W. H. Hudson: A Biography* (Oxford, 1984), 173.

⁵⁸ Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 246.

writers like Hudson, imbue the tramps that they meet with a higher, almost spiritual connection with nature.⁵⁹

Solnit comments that the “tramp,” “vagabond,” and “gypsy” were “popular among the walking writers;” the clerical walker-writer desires to emulate the tramp, if only for the duration of the ramble.⁶⁰ *Mr. Finchley* begins with a quotation from the *Youth Hostel Association Handbook*, which states: “[clerks] will make wonderful discoveries in their own country and, once they have tasted the pleasures of this vagabondage, they will return to it again and again.”⁶¹ These words, as well as the characters Mr. Finchley meets, encourage him to “have a go” at tramping—he sends his possessions and money ahead of him and samples a life of odd jobs and occasional pay, albeit knowing that he only has to make it thirty miles to Exeter to be assured of his belongings and a hot meal. Peter Vibart, the protagonist of Jeffery Farnol’s Regency-set ramble, *The Broad Highway* (1910), sets out on his walking tour, determined to “turn [his] hand to some useful employment” such as digging, once his money runs out.⁶² He has the comfort of knowing that his wealthy friend Sir Richard will assist should the need ever arise, just as Mr. Lucton, the company partner, knows he has only to contact his family or associates in order to receive financial aid.

Solnit argues that “to play at tramp or gypsy is one way of demonstrating that you are not really one.”⁶³ In becoming a Rambler, the clerk was attempting to achieve some kind of classlessness that would free him, for a short time, from his carefully restricted place in society. And so, Finchley even begins to look like a tramp during his ramble: “At that time he

⁵⁹ Tebbutt mentions that wild landscapes were increasingly viewed as offering “national ‘spiritual renewal’” in the twentieth century. Tebbutt, “Rambling and Manly Identity,” 1136.

⁶⁰ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 156.

⁶¹ John Higgins, “Mr. Finchley Discovers His England,”

<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/wordscape/canning/finch1.html>, accessed August 28, 2011.

⁶² Jeffery Farnol, *The Broad Highway* (London, 1910), 16.

⁶³ Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 124.

was in need of a wash; there was a two days' growth of beard on his chin, a rent in the seat of his grey trousers caused by a projecting nail in the [boat's] boards, bacon fat and cocoa stains down his jacket front, and the upper of his right shoe was working away from its sole."⁶⁴ He reverts, at the end of the novel, to a neatly dressed clerk, in order to survive the realities of the office and the strict dress code demanded by his housekeeper. The clerk was not, however, simply playing at middle-class tramp; he was organically forging a connection with working-class ruralism that lasts longer than his holiday—harking without cynicism back to his “yeoman roots.”

The “Manly” Clerk

Melanie Tebbutt’s “Rambling and Manly Identity” argues that for the northern clerk—described as “priggish, [with an] ‘effeminate’ emphasis on duty, self-improvement, moral propriety and ‘puritan self-denial’”—rambling clubs in the Dark Peaks were crucial as a physically challenging, “re-masculating” environment.⁶⁵ For the southern clerk, however, the ramble is more complex in terms of gender. As Tebbutt asserts, the “softer, domesticated southern landscapes” were not the most obvious scene for robust acts of explicitly male physicality.⁶⁶ These landscapes had been shaped and contoured by centuries of agriculture; fertile, welcoming and, in the summertime, when most rambles were taken, places of abundance. Consider, for example, the scenery in Hughes’s very early ramble, *The White Horse* (1859) as he journeys towards London:

⁶⁴ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 250.

⁶⁵ This is Tebbutt’s summation of popular attitudes, so ripe for satire. Tebbutt, “Rambling and Manly Identity,” 1138.

⁶⁶ Tebbutt, “Rambling and Manly Identity,” 1134.

By the time we got past Wormwood Scrubbs (which looked so fresh and breezy with the gossamer lying all over it), I could think of nothing else but the country and my holiday. How I did enjoy the pretty hill with the church at top and the stream at the bottom by Hanwell, and the great old trees about half a mile off on the right before you get to Slough, and the view of Windsor Castle, and crossing the Thames at Maidenhead, with its splendid weeping willows [...] And then all the corn-fields, though by this time most of them were only stubble, and Reading town, and the great lasher at Pangbourn, where the water was rushing and dancing through the sunlight to welcome me into Berkshire.⁶⁷

There is evidence here of a landscape that not only has been recently harvested but has had visible inhabitation for many centuries; the contrast between the ecological (“the great old trees”), the historical (Windsor castle), and the developed (the towns of Slough and Reading) draws the reader’s attention to the layering of the scene that has drawn clerk Richard Easy towards Berkshire for his holiday. It is a far cry from the craggy outlooks and mountainous wilderness of the rural north:

First I went [...] into the orchard where the trees were all loaded with apples and pears, and so out into a stubble-field at the back, where there were a lot of young pigs feeding and playing queer tricks, and back through the farm-yard into the great pasture, where I lay down on the grass, under one of the elms, and lighted my pipe; and thought of our hot clerks’ room, and how Jem Fisher and little Neddy were working away there.⁶⁸

A more idyllic farmhouse scene can hardly be imagined, and yet, Richard does not partake in the agricultural reality—an easily identifiable site of masculine energy—but lazes in the sun,

⁶⁷ Hughes, *White Horse*, 22.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

indulging his thirst for knowledge about the White Horse by striking up conversations with elderly laborers and locals.

Mr. Lucton also finds his spontaneous ramble soothing when viewed in contrast to the strains of office life: “In all his life he had seen no surroundings that seemed better suited for the soothing of jangled nerves, the calming of turbulent emotions, the solving of vexatious problems in an atmosphere of true tranquillity.” Unlike Richard, he enjoys the physicality of the rural environment:

Mr. Lucton found this novel exercise superbly exhilarating. It involved every muscle in his arms and loins and torso. He had discarded his coat and his collar and turned up his shirt-sleeves; his body rejoiced in an unaccustomed freedom from the restrictions of civilized clothing, almost as if it had suddenly been freed and come to life.⁶⁹

There is a certain maleness foregrounded in this hay-making scene, emphasized by references to the clerk-rambler’s reinvigorated masculine body. This happens again in Canning’s *Mr. Finchley*, largely through the feminisation of the landscape:

The light of morning came sprouting over the bare shoulders of the downs, tipping the long ridge with golden lines and throwing great pools of black and grey shadows across the plain. Slowly the broad scarp-faces quickened into a green life that caught at the wavering light and held it fast to the breast of the earth. The sun tipped the edge of the hills in a blazing tiara and every copse and thicket, each barn and cottage, sprang into a bold relief.⁷⁰

Here, Finchley becomes the male voyeur, surveying a sexualized landscape. It should be noted that Finchley has just rescued Jane, a young damsel in distress; she is sleeping in the

⁶⁹ Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom*, 94–95.

⁷⁰ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 43.

car while he appreciates this scene, and when he returns to her, he carries honeysuckle for her lapel. Given all this, it is no surprise that Finchley becomes more visibly masculine by the end of the novel: “Beneath his dirty, scrubby face, however, there was a healthy tan, and the long lines under his eyes were from dirt alone, he was leaner, though still stout, and the tonsure round his brown head was turning golden with the bleaching action of the sun.”⁷¹

Insofar as the clerk was originally aligned with stereotypically feminine traits such as working indoors, being overly domestic, and plagued by ill-health, the rambler creates a clerk who is healthier, more vigorous and enthused by an open-air existence; in short, more *masculine*. Finchley muses after a few adventures that “he was Edgar Finchley; he was a man.”⁷² Finchley continues: “He was no timid clerk. He had mixed with crooks and bested them. He had lazed in the sun and loved its heat on his skin. He had fought with his fists, fought like a wild-cat, and won.”⁷³

In *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, the rambler is again positioned as masculine before a feminized landscape: the “face of the earth,” we read, was “more lovely, more friendly and more familiar” than the “town-bred women [who] were apt to be anxious and peevish.”⁷⁴ For Lucton, this gentle and welcoming femininity of the landscape offers comfort that his seemingly uncaring wife will not.⁷⁵ Thus the scene that Brett Young makes most overtly sensual is one in which Lucton feels most accepted: “To Lucton’s eyes the scene of that tired returning appeared strangely beautiful: the big meadow cleared of its haycocks now, lay naked and luminous in a mild light that seemed nearer the moon’s light than the sun’s.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ Ibid., 250.

⁷² Ibid., 58.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, 54, 89.

⁷⁵ It is suggested that while Lucton was a prisoner of war, his wife nursed, and consequently fell in love with, a soldier who later died.

⁷⁶ Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, 97.

The feminization of the landscape acts as a reminder of the deliberate exclusion of women themselves from these clerkly-rambles. In these novels, the clerk is portrayed as having gleefully left feminine domesticity behind—the ramble being as much about an escape from marriage as it is from society more widely. At the beginning of Jerome’s *Three Men on the Bummel*, for example, his characters deliberate on the best approach to subtly leaving their womenfolk behind so that they can have a proper holiday (on the grounds that “unbroken domesticity cloy[s] the brain”).⁷⁷ Mr. Brogden, George Gissing’s protagonist in *A Freak of Nature, or, Mr. Brogden, City Clerk* (1899), though drained by his work, is finally prompted to set off on his ramble, not because of the office, but by his wife:

One Saturday evening, when Mrs. Brogden was discussing a grocer’s bill, he suddenly experienced the strangest sensation. His brain seemed to rotate, and he clutched the table to prevent his body from likewise going round. Then a quivering fell upon his limbs, and his teeth chattered.

“Stop! Please stop!” he exclaimed, staring half wrathfully, half fearfully, at his wife.⁷⁸

This desire to escape domestic and marital ennui is repeated in *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom* when Lucton toys with the idea of not returning home after his evening drive. He reasons that it will not make much difference either way: ““On a long summer evening like this it doesn’t matter a damn how late I come home—not that it’d [sic] matter all that much,” he smiled rather grimly,—‘if I never came home at all.’”⁷⁹ His speculation, it seems, is correct; while Lucton is away his son simply fills his place by running the office, and his wife and daughter leave for a sunbathing holiday on the Riviera. The reader never hears of their response to either his disappearance or return.

⁷⁷ Jerome, *Three Men on the Bummel*, 7.

⁷⁸ George Gissing, *A Freak of Nature, or, Mr. Brogden, City Clerk* (Edinburgh, 1990), 26.

⁷⁹ Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom*, 52.

Two female figures enter Canning's narrative about Finchley as a reminder of the necessity for a ramble/escape. The first is an officious landlady, Mrs. Pattern, who takes the place of the wife in presenting the spectre of feminine control. In the early stages of his ramble, and before he fully relaxes, Finchley continues to measure his behavior and appearance by the standards of Mrs. Pattern: "[his clothes were] not dry as Mrs. Pattern understood that word."⁸⁰ However, once he returns home, he is empowered by the knowledge that he has lived roughly, and in a manner that would have shocked and appalled Mrs. Pattern. The second, fleeting glimpse of potential matrimonial bliss takes the form of former-client Mrs. Crantell, whom Finchley, by chance, encounters at St Ives. Despite being attracted to the widow, he leaves St Ives and Mrs. Crantell behind because the seaside holiday (and competition for Mrs. Crantell's attention from Mr. Henry Fadewaite) bores and frustrates Finchley. He feels more comfortable on the road. For Finchley, the ramble involves an element of freedom from the strict confines of domesticity, and the same may be said of Lucton, who calls himself "a fugitive from the ties of family life."⁸¹

Having said all this, it should be acknowledged that female enchantresses are occasionally encountered on the ramble. Finchley, as we have seen, meets young Jane, and not-very-young Mrs. Crantell during the course of his ramble, though neither have a clear or lasting impact. Richard Easy falls in love with his friend's sister, Lucy, in *The White Horse*, but despite securing her brother's blessing, he returns to London alone and doubtful as to whether or not he will see her again. In another instance, Mr. Lucton, who is married, falls for a young female hiker with a dazzling smile. Whilst they merely pass each other on a path in the early stages of the novel, they shelter together on a foggy hilltop towards the end of Lucton's ramble. The girl, Diana Powys, is in a state of distress because she has fallen out with her hiker-poet-boyfriend, and Lucton both comforts and advises her, rekindling, in the process, *not* a romantic interest but the paternal bond which he feels has been lost with his own daughters. Diana disappears from the mountain before Lucton wakes, and in the end he

⁸⁰ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 102.

⁸¹ Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, 102.

dismisses her as a youthful menace: “girls like her are a public danger.”⁸² Likewise, Finchley chastises runaway Jane as a “saucy minx.”⁸³ These women are, then, important figures within the ramble but, in the end, they do not jeopardize the introspective nature of the ramble; rather, they reinforce, more generally, a heterosexual masculinity.

The relationship between “landscape, walking, and manliness” that Tebbutt asserts is apparent in the Dark Peak of Derbyshire does not undermine the reassertion of masculinity in the idyllic rural south.⁸⁴ Instead, the tropes that Tebbutt identifies can be viewed, perhaps in more nuanced terms, in the Home Counties—the connection with Romanticism, the dominance of the male gaze, the necessity to rebuke fin-de-siècle anxieties about deviant masculinities, and, finally, the desire for intellectual self-improvement.

An English Heritage

Outwardly, as we have seen, the ramble was a period of physical reinvigoration, but the clerk progressed in other ways. The ramble was also an intellectual pursuit; as Canning puts it, there is an “expansion . . . taking place in [Finchley’s] mind.”⁸⁵ The ramble provided the clerk not only with a chance to reinforce his masculinity but also an opportunity to engage with history and culture. This is very obvious when, in *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910), Wells’s ‘three P’s’—the trainee drapers Polly, Platt, and Parsons—take long Bank Holiday walks in the countryside:

There is no countryside like the English countryside for those who have learned to love it; its firm yet gentle lines of hill and dale, its ordered confusion of features, its

⁸² Ibid., 227.

⁸³ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 48.

⁸⁴ Tebbutt, “Rambling and Manly Identity,” 1126.

⁸⁵ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 159.

deer parks and downland, its castles and stately homes, its farms and ricks and great barns and ancient trees, its pools and ponds and shining threads of rivers, its flower-starred hedgerows, its orchards and woodland patches, its village greens and kindly inns.⁸⁶

The countryside is full of history—castles, stately homes, and ancient trees. Morton makes that fact explicit in his vastly popular and anecdotal *In Search of England* (1928): “I will shake up the dust of kings and abbots; I will bring the knights and the cavaliers back to the roads, and, once in a while, I will hear the thunder of old quarrels at earthwork and church door.”⁸⁷ As Jonathan Rutherford notes in his cultural history of empire and masculinity, the ramble—and explicitly nostalgic works like Morton’s—can be seen within the context of a more general post-Victorian interest in the “rediscover[y]” of rural England that could recreate the “old country” and re-establish “political shape and meaning to Englishness.”⁸⁸ George Bourne (a shopkeeper and former teacher) furthers this notion in his novel of 1913, *Lucy Bettesworth*, claiming that it was the *south* of the country that was “suggestive of the sturdy rural life [and] inseparable from England’s romantic history.”⁸⁹ In this section, I will discuss how the clerk-rambler wanted to engage with landscape history, the ways in which his concept of this “history” was inextricably linked to national identity, and the manner in which this identity was geographically specific.

That the clerk wanted to learn from his ramble and discover something of the local and national heritage is mirrored by the books he tended to read—Bast, for instance, not only

⁸⁶ H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr. Polly* (London, 1969), 22.

⁸⁷ H. V. Morton, *In Search of England* (London, 1926), 22.

⁸⁸ John Rutherford, *Forever England: Reflections on Masculinity and Empire* (London, 1997), 51.

⁸⁹ George Bourne, “Extract from *Lucy Bettesworth*,” in *The Open Air*, ed. Adrian Bell (London, 1944), 243.

reads John Ruskin but also studies other contemporary celebrations of rural life by such as Richard Jefferies, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Henry David Thoreau. Again, Lucton frequently cites both Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). The ramble offered, therefore, an encounter with the past that could, in many ways, counter the uncertainty of the present. Witness, for instance, the reassuring classical and medieval information detailed in the Manchester Clerk's *A Fortnight's Ramble* and Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), each of which betrays an appetite for not only formal history but also folklore and tradition. The great churches, castles, and ruins passed along the rambler's way together create a connection with the past and reinforce a very particular sense of Englishness. Note, for example how Hughes writes of Wiltshire: "Installed as chronicler to the White Horse, I entered with no ill will on my office, having been all my life possessed, as is the case with so many Englishmen, by intense local attachment [and] love for every stone and turf of the country where I was born and bred."⁹⁰ The novel itself is a compilation of fiction, myth, historical knowledge, and folklore—a veritable "stir-about," as Hughes puts it—and significantly Hughes, who presents the novel as a memorial to the White Horse Hill festival of 1857, chooses a clerical protagonist through whom to communicate his research into "the scattered legends and traditions of the country side."⁹¹

It is no accident that the one antiquarian detail that fascinates Richard Easy is the legend of St. George and the dragon. Patriotism is central when Finchley comes across the Wellington Monument in Somerset and stands in awe of the "tall monument thrusting up from the bare top of the hill," whilst reflecting on the "memory of the brave duke."⁹² Here we have an illustrative combination of both history and masculinity; Finchley's own manliness becomes mirrored in the phallic monument that also simultaneously reasserts proud national

⁹⁰ Hughes, *White Horse*, vi.

⁹¹ Hughes talks of the practical application of Richard's clerkly skills in recording this history—his "very good memory" and "short-hand." *Ibid.*, 18–19, v–vi.

⁹² Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 145.

memory. We should note that Canning here refers to a real monument within his work of fiction; these rambling novels often feature a basic level of factual history as well as reinforcing particular national legacies. Since many clerical authors had their thirst for history only whetted during their formal schooling, the growing opportunities to attend lectures in local history at the Worker's Educational Association, the YMCA, and various technical institutions, would have been very enticing. Such lectures, whilst not being equal to the many years spent studying in a more traditional academic setting, still provided a sound knowledge of historical matters. Indeed, by actively engaging with the rural landscape on a ramble, the rambler-clerk possessed a more organic understanding of history than that which was taught to middle-class boys in the classroom.

The clerk's focus was on a strictly *English* heritage, which ignored the Roman past while foregrounding the medieval; this view of England reinforced a particular narrative that offered strength in a time of insecurity. It was also, more practically, a cheaper option to study the medievalism still visible in the landscape and architecture surrounding the clerk than a Classical past better studied in Europe. The opinion of Cabot, in *Musings of a City Clerk* (1913),⁹³ goes so far as to suggest that clerks will revel far more in their homeland, anyway, than they could in Venice, Naples, or Paris, for there would always be disappointment in finding that the continental reality cannot match up to the myth:

The Days of Splendour, of Romance, of Nobility are as far from us and our pinckbeck
 "fashion" and "form" as the days of dead Caesar are. No, you will not find me going

⁹³ This is, as the Preface establishes, a "compilation of . . . somewhat varied sketches" that are designed to entertain fellow city workers. It is not a ramble narrative on the same terms as some of the fictional works discussed in this chapter, but rather Cabot explores his short time as a commercial clerk, and in doing so, demonstrates comparable attitudes towards the open road.

over there. It would not satisfy my wants. When my annual fortnight comes round I shall go off as usual. . . . Do a little swimming or beach combing with my old friend . . . or, again, perhaps I may decide to give my old friend Farmer Drysdale a look up, and have a little old homely talk with him about his pedigree Tamworths. . . . Just one simple old English farm house, or just a sweep of light green English sea, with just one stretch of English sky above us.⁹⁴

As well as reassuring those with limited funds that the Continental experience is not worth having, this talk of the English sea and English sky alerts us to the intensity with which the clerk can identify the nation with nature. David Lowenthal argues that this particular identification arose out of the lack of other national signifiers, such as a costume or holiday. He suggests that “nowhere else is landscape so feted as legacy, nowhere else does the very term suggest not simply scenery and *genres de vie*, but quintessential national values.”⁹⁵ The idealisation of the Home Counties, which were so close to the capital, created a sense that the pastoral idyll was within reach of the average Londoner, this quasi-Edenic vision dominated the cultural construction of Englishness. Most of our clerk-rambler narratives begin in London, and describe in detail the journey from city to countryside. For example, as Finchley passes through Kings Langley, despite being held captive in the back of a stolen Bentley, we read of his pleasure at leaving London: “they flashed by dark copses and over little white bridge where streams broke into cool lashers, by the side of a long park rich with huge oaks and browsing deer.”⁹⁶

One of the authors that popularized Dent’s Open-Air Series was Hudson, a well-known writer of English nature books, who very rarely travelled outside of the southern

⁹⁴ Cabot [pseud.], *The Musings of a City Clerk* (London, 1913), 238–39.

⁹⁵ David Lowenthal, “British National Identity and the English Landscape,” *Rural History* 2 (1991), 205-230, 213.

⁹⁶ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 16.

counties—in fact, in his biography there is no mention of a single northern location.⁹⁷ For Hudson, as well as many others, London becomes symbolic of commercialism and industrialisation, while the southern counties are imagined quintessentially as meadows, vales, idyllic churches, and quaint hamlets. This is fundamental to the contrasts inherent between not only the south and north but the urban and the rural, or work and holiday. As W. J. Loftie writes in *In and Out of London: or, the Half-Holidays of a Town Clerk* (1875):

London is full of interest; and the country within half a day's journey of London is the most interesting part of England. The man who knows something of the history of Kent, Surrey, and Hertfordshire, knows something tangible of the history of his country. He can connect events with places: and the places are often beautiful, while the events are often the greatest in our history. And the working men of London—be they clerks priestly or lay, be they merchants or mechanics—can find, within the limits of a Saturday afternoon's excursion, scenes and places which a tour on the Continent will not exceed, for the Englishman, either in interest or beauty.⁹⁸

Here we can see two striking representations of England. Loftie's first point is that Kent, Surrey and Hertfordshire hold unparalleled significance in terms of England. If we look at the number of sites of historical importance currently owned by English Heritage in the Home Counties, Loftie's argument remains persuasive. Castles, houses, palaces, monuments, and ruins number amongst the forty-one sites of interest in the Home Counties alone, while there are only sixty-eight in the entire area to the north of the Humber.⁹⁹ The second aspect of

⁹⁷ Tomalin, *W. H. Hudson*.

⁹⁸ W. J. Loftie, *In and Out of London: or, the Half-Holidays of a Town Clerk* (New York, 1875), 17.

⁹⁹ English Heritage Property List, accessed October 1 2011. <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/>.

Loftie's commentary is that this rural vision of England becomes intricately connected with the south, partly because of cultural and nostalgic influences, but also because the London-based, clerk-rambler could only afford, and only had time, to travel in the south. Gissing's Mr. Brogden, who is preoccupied with the cost of surviving on a clerk's salary, can justify a short trip to Wiltshire because the train fare is reasonable. Likewise, Hughes's clerk Richard, despite having been recently given a bonus, decides to stay in England because it will save him the cost of the steam packet; he chooses Berkshire because it allows him to put "three pounds into [his] pocket, and please an old friend."¹⁰⁰

In short, the clerk and his concern with heritage plays a part in the development of what Mandler calls the "new 'Englishness'" that identified the "squire-archival village of Southern or 'Deep' England as the template on which the national character had been formed and thus the ideal towards which it must inevitably return."¹⁰¹ The idyllic vision of Englishness that had its roots in the nineteenth century ignored the importance of northern industrialization in favor of an anachronistic, rural vision of England. Gerard DeGroot explains, "the mighty British Empire was built on Sheffield steel, Newcastle coal and Clydeside engineering, yet the prevalent images of Britain remain those of stately homes, cottage gardens, Henley regattas and strawberries at Wimbledon."¹⁰² The domination of this particular version of "England" ("England real or England fake, England now or England then," as Robert Colls calls it) was interwoven across varied cultural forms to create a powerful myth that connoted belonging.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Hughes, *White Horse*, 12.

¹⁰¹ Mandler, "Against 'Englishness'," 155.

¹⁰² What is interesting is that the depiction DeGroot outlines has remained a popular one, and one that culturally has been characterized as the "true" England, even to this day. Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British Society in the Era of the Great War* (London, 1996), 290.

¹⁰³ Robert Colls, "The People's Orwell," in *Classes, Cultures, and Politics: Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin*, ed. Clare V. J. Griffiths et al. (Oxford, 2011), 168.

Most of the rambles during this period are set within a hundred-mile radius of London—mainly in Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Berkshire, Wiltshire, Hampshire, and Essex. Some clerks ventured to Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, and Oxfordshire, which was considered the “north,” and a few reached as far as East Anglia and the West Country. Peter Vibart, in *The Broad Highway*, follows a typical pattern when he declares, “I shall go, sir, on a walking tour through Kent and Surrey into Devonshire and then probably to Cornwall.”¹⁰⁴ Finchley begins his ramble by passing through Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire before venturing westward to Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall. Mr. Lucton is something of an exception because his ramble takes place in the West Midlands and on the Welsh borderlands; he passes through Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, and ends in Shropshire—the rural areas that have much in common with the cultural idyll of the south.

It is a southern, agricultural landscape that characterizes the majority of the clerk-rambler narratives and that informs the more general idea of Englishness. In *The Broad Highway*, Vibart, for example, strolls through the “beautiful land of Kent, past tree and hedge and smiling meadow;”¹⁰⁵ in *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom*, Lucton muses on “the orchard-lands of the Severn Plain, with the slow Avon meandering about its feet, and larks overhead.”¹⁰⁶ In extreme cases, the connotations of the rural idyll are so inextricably connected to the southern landscape that the rambler must first travel from more northern areas to the iconic Home Counties. Thus, the “Manchester Clerk” states that he has “the purpose of seeing whatever [is] notable and lovely, both of town and country—in a *given* direction.”¹⁰⁷ This “given direction” is, of course, southwards and the majority of his ramble takes place around the Home Counties because there the author feels he will find the “heart” of England. This

¹⁰⁴ Farnol, *The Broad Highway*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Brett Young, *Mr. Lucton’s Freedom*, 52.

¹⁰⁷ Manchester Clerk, *A Fortnight’s Ramble*, 5.

sentiment is echoed in Canning's *Everyman's England* (1936), a collection of his 1930s *Daily Mail* travel portraits, which ends in a plea for readers to make their own pilgrimage.¹⁰⁸

That the average clerical worker longed to leave the grime of the city is neither surprising, nor is it that clerk-ramblers all comment on their heightened awareness of city conditions whilst rambling. Mr. Brogden calls London a “burden which had all but crushed him” at the “first sight of open country,” whilst Richard Easy’s fortnight on a Berkshire farm heightens the contrast with clerky life: “Elm Close . . . will be like a little bright window with the sun shining through into our musty clerks’ room.”¹⁰⁹ Again, Finchley talks about the “wearisome greyness in which he had moved dream-fashion” in London before coming “alive” on his rural retreat, whilst Jerome’s fictional narrator J. also believes that to be lost in the countryside is beneficial:

[I] suggested that we should seek out some retired and old-world spot, far from the madding crowd, and dream away a sunny week among its drowsy lanes—some half-forgotten nook, hidden away by the fairies, out of reach of the noisy world—some quaint-perched eyrie on the cliffs of Time, from whence the surging waves of the nineteenth century would sound far-off and faint.¹¹⁰

There is a hint here of the esotericism that became entwined with certain kinds of rural Englishness towards the end of the Victorian period. Frequently, this rural England took the

¹⁰⁸ Canning writes, “I have written this book of the impressions that I have gathered by visiting, and living in, various parts of England, in the hope that on reading these pages you may find old memories awakening in you, or feel the desire to make the same discoveries yourself.” Canning, *Everyman's England* (Chichester, 2011), 10.

¹⁰⁹ Gissing, *Mr. Brogden*, 27; Hughes, *White Horse*, 186.

¹¹⁰ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 13; Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, 11–12.

form of a vision of a pre-industrial fairyland that epitomized the medieval values of knightly courage and chivalry.

As Mark Girouard has argued, there was a gradual revival in “the code of medieval chivalry” through the nineteenth century, up until the outbreak of the First World War. In many ways this particular expression of late-Victorian masculinity was more suited to the clerk-rambler than the muscular Christianity that was popular at the end of the century.¹¹¹ The attractiveness of the chivalric code was that it did not violate the increasing secularism of the age and yet still provided a kind of transcendentalism. Many of the authors under discussion had a particular fascination with Arthurian legends or the medieval: Canning wrote a trilogy of novels depicting King Arthur; Hughes wrote a history of Alfred the Great; and rambler-publisher Dent resurrected his Camelot series in 1904.¹¹² One of Mr. Lucton’s first acts as a *bona-fide* rambler is the purchase of a classical reprint of the two volumes of Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, at which moment he sees himself as a modern Sir Uwaine (which plays on the fact that Lucton’s first name is Owen), traveling through deep valleys to rescue a fair maiden. Richard Easy also becomes mesmerized by the world of King Alfred, transported through the landscape and folk legend into antiquity, carrying forever with him the “fair rich Vale, and the glorious old Hill . . . and all the memories of the slaying of dragons, and of great battles with the Pagan.”¹¹³

Finally, we come to the complexity of the rambler, for despite overcoming his characteristic clerical cautiousness and allowing himself to wander in a vagabond fashion, the

¹¹¹ Muscular Christianity blended Christian doctrine with a public-school ethos in order to promote sporting competition among young men and encourage perfect manliness—in both body and soul. It was, in part, a reaction to the so-called “deviant” masculinities epitomized in the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895. See Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, 1981), preface [n.p].

¹¹² Dent, *House of Dent*, 147.

¹¹³ Hughes, *White Horse*, 199.

clerk must return to London.¹¹⁴ The last line in Hughes's novel is: "And so ended my fortnight's holiday."¹¹⁵ Richard Easy "creeps" towards Gray's Inn Lane in a cab, just as Finchley's narrative ends as he sneaks back into his home without waking his housekeeper to abandon his rugged new clothes and dress once more as a "proper" clerk. Lucton likewise comes home, dresses conservatively, and heads to the office, becoming "once more a prominent citizen of no mean city."¹¹⁶ Despite the submission to "real life" and the return to the "plight" narrative of clerical fiction, the rambling clerk does manage to throw off the chains of respectability, and, in doing so, shakes the foundations of the clerical stereotype. Moreover, Finchley "would always have [a] memory of peace and beauty to soothe his harassed soul."¹¹⁷ Lucton also retains, it seems, some faint memory of the liberation of the ramble, for in the very last line of the novel he "mounted the stairs that led to his office with a springy step."¹¹⁸ A book review in *The Montreal Gazette* noted: "When Mr. Finchley returns at last to London, a wiser but not a sadder man, we part from him reluctantly. We have enjoyed his company, have shared his experiences, and have learned the lesson that his strange holiday taught him. He never got to Margate, but he got to a far better place; if only a spiritual destination."¹¹⁹ Perhaps, though, it is in Richard Easy's reflections that we best appreciate how far the clerk has come:

¹¹⁴ See Hillary Hinds, "Domestic Disappointments: Feminine Middlebrow Fiction of the Interwar Years," *Home Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2009): 199–211, for an interesting discussion of women in middlebrow fiction who escape and then return.

¹¹⁵ Hughes, *White Horse*, 286.

¹¹⁶ Young, *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, 343.

¹¹⁷ Canning, *Mr. Finchley*, 251.

¹¹⁸ Young, *Mr. Lucton's Freedom*, 343.

¹¹⁹ "An Innocent Abroad," review of *Mr. Finchley Discovers His England*, by Victor Canning, *The Montreal Gazette*, May 4, 1935,

I felt that another man was journeying back from the one who had come down a fortnight before; that he who was travelling eastward had learnt to look beyond his own narrow cellar in the great world-city, to believe in other things than cash payments and short-hand for making his cellar liveable in, to have glimpses of and to sympathize with the life of other men, in his own time, and in the old times before him.¹²⁰

Within a two-week period, the clerk manages to affect a dramatic change in representational terms; he now is a masculine figure, has adventures within his own landscape worthy of those of Rider Haggard's characters in the Empire, and becomes educated in a particular version of national-historical memory. What is more, the figure at the heart of these rambling narratives has captured a broader audience than clerk-readers alone; the clerk has become a literary pioneer in shaping a genre that attempts to overcome the nation's fears about the loss of the rural landscape, decline of the "national stock," and international rivalries, positing non-jingoistic national identities and domesticated masculinities as a solution.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1946&dat=19350504&id=iJMuAAAIBAJ&sjid=FpkFAAAAIBAJ&pg=6818,528357>, accessed on Nov. 24, 2011,

¹²⁰ Hughes, *White Horse*, 198.