


Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village

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In this rich, rare book— which John Updike called "exquisite"— forty-nine men and women— a blacksmith and a bellringer to the local vet and a gravedigger— speak to us directly, in honest and evocative monologues, of their works and days in the rural country of Suffolk. Composed in the late 1960's, Blythe's volume paints a vivid picture of a community in which the vast changes of the twentieth century are matched by deep continuities of history, tradition, and nature.

Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village Details

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From Reader Review *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* for online ebook

John says

[My copy is from Pantheon/Random House, not Penguin]

This is my favorite sort of history book - 90+% source material and < 10% commentary.

In the author's words, "This book is the quest for the voice of Akenfield, Suffolk, [England] as it sounded during the summer and autumn of 1967." It consists of dozens of statements by village residents of all types. These are not interviews; they are uninterrupted speeches, and cover the person's life, current events, village goings-on, outlook on life, and whatever else came to mind.

1967 was a key point in time to take a cross-section of an agricultural community, particularly in Suffolk, where the echoes of feudalism had persisted until just after World War I. Until then, farmers (as the landholders) had acted like lords, with farm-workers being bound to farmers in hereditary positions.

By 1967, agricultural practices and labor relations were a world apart from what they'd been 50 years earlier, but the older folks still remembered what it had been like. Those memories encompass not just the old ways of being and doing, but the brutal conditions engendered by the great agricultural depression in the late nineteenth century.

I have no idea how interesting this book would be to readers in Britain, but to a reader in the US like me, who is fascinated by the way things once were, *Akenfield* is a precious glimpse back at the life my English ancestors might have lived.

Duntay says

Ronald Blythe's 'strange journey to a familiar land' is an oral history classic. Written more than 40 years ago, it still seems quite fresh. It is prescient - documenting the beginnings of factory farming and monoculture. It makes observations about people retiring to the village for a life in the country - who purchase plants from garden centres and can name 100 different kinds of roses, but have no idea what grows in the hedgerows. The book can also be heartbreaking, full of loneliness and stifled ambitions.

I know there was a follow-up written in the 1980's, but it does not give us updates on individuals. I would like to know what happened to some of their hopes and dreams.

Holley Peterson says

Poetic, strange, charming, eccentric, sad, admirable - eavesdropping on the internal and eternal voices of souls long gone from a way of life that's as remote to us now as... prairie homesteaders, perhaps. Not sure how Blythe got his taciturn villagers to talk so freely - probably because it's about their work, rarely their personal lives. And collectively, they never will complain about the present; it's always the past that was so

difficult. Farriers, farmers, country doctors, bell ringers, gravediggers, deacons, schoolteacher, nurse, village fool, orchard manager - everyone gets a chance. Read one or two a time, then savour. Unusual and always interesting.

Tony says

Before *Village* was appropriated into an idyll, it was a real place, with real people, and real jobs. This book is about such a place. It is a kind of oral history of a mid-20th Century English village, mostly in the words of people not inclined to talk. And it is splendid.

LEONARD THOMPSON, 71, Farm-worker: *Our cottage was nearly empty -- except for people.*

THE BRIGADIER (rtd), on the church going to pot: *What you need is the padre type, somebody who will have a drink with you in the bar and who has the right to say to you, "Now look here, old boy. You've been grizzling away about your Ethel and her short-comings, but do you ever think about how she feels being left alone all the evening while you are lining them up here? I mean, fair's fair. . . ."*

THE REV. GETHYN OWEN, 63, Rural Dean: *Religion has a lot to do with where their families and ancestors are buried.*

ROBERT PALGRAVE, 55, Bellringer and Tower Captain: *The bells tolled for death when I was a boy. It was three times three for a man and three times two for a woman. People would look up and say, "Hullo, a death?" Then the years of the dead person's age would be tolled and if the bell went on speaking, "seventy-one, seventy-two . . ." people would say, "Well, they had a good innings!" But when the bell stopped at eighteen or twenty a hush would come over the fields. (I remember this well in my own village.)*

DAVID COLLYER, 29, Forester and Labour Party Organizer: *Although I do not like towns, I think they are necessary when one is young. A town boy can drift into an art gallery--if it is only to get warm--and then see a picture, and then begin to feel and think about art. Or he might go to a concert, just to see what it was like, or hang around a big public library. From the minute he does these things he begins to be a different person, even if he doesn't realize it. For an ordinary village boy everything to do with these things is somehow unnatural. The village people live almost entirely without culture. I was over twenty before I realized that classical music was just "music," and therefore all one had to do was listen to it. I listened and at first believed I had no right to listen. I felt affected. But when I began to enjoy it I stopped worrying. Everything I do begins with doubt and insecurity. It is as though I am using a language which I haven't a right to use.*

CHRISTOPHER FALCONER, 39, Gardener: *The boy under-gardeners had to help arrange the flowers in the house. These were done every day. We had to creep in early in the morning before breakfast and replace the great banks of flowers in the main rooms. Lordship and Ladyship must never hear or see you doing it; fresh flowers had to just be there, that was all there was to it. There was never a dead flower. It was as if flowers, for them, lived for ever. It was part of the magic of their lives.*

FRANCIS LAMBERT, 25, Forge-worker: *Young men should always look for work which interests them, no matter how long it takes them to find it. No man should go in at morning to wait for the clock at night. And people who want the money without the work spoil everything.*

ERNIE BOWERS, 55, Thatcher: *I get up at half past five of a morning. I work many hours. I get tired, but I*

will be all right, I suppose. There are all these great boys in the house--they keep you lively. But you can't get into a conversation with a young person as you could years ago. They just haven't got the interest. They don't want our kind of talk. They're all strangers--all strangers.

You don't make much money if you work with your hands. You can't make the turnover. But I have no regrets working so slowly. I began in a world without time.

MRS. SULLIVAN, 55, Headmistress: *You could, if you weren't careful, become attached to the children in a school like this. Sentimental. But you don't if you're wise. They must do what they are here to do. Learn enough by eleven so that they are able to go on learning when they leave.*

MICHAEL POOLE, 37, Orchard Worker (*"He is simple . . ." people will say.*):

I went to work on the fruit when I was fourteen. I never minded it. I got my money and that was the main thing. I grew, my money grew. It was nice to have it.

Summer was the best. You'd get the women come and give you a look. You'd torment them and they'd torment you. There used to be a regular procession of old girls who'd bike up from Framlingham for the picking.

When I was sixteen, one of these old girls came up to me in the orchard and said, "Let me see your watch." I didn't answer.

"Aren't you going to let me see your watch then?"

I said nothing. Anyway, she could see my watch; it was lying on my waistcoat under the apple tree.

"I shall take it . . ." she says.

"Take it then."

"I reckon you want me to take it?"

"I can see you're bent on it," I said, "so you may as well."

So she took it, for devilry. It was on a chain and she hung it round her fat neck the whole live-long afternoon. I wouldn't let her see it worried me. She'd walk by and shout, "Come and get it!"

I said nothing. She brought it to me about five, before she set off home. She put it over my head like a necklace and said, "There you are, you young bugger."

I wouldn't speak to her.

The next morning, along she comes, straight to where I'm about to start. Her arms were stuck out full length and she was all smiles. She got her mouth on my face and, my God, she must have thought it was her breakfast, or something.

I pushed at her. I said, "Don't! Look out, he's coming!" --He was, too. Old Fletcher the foreman. She broke away but back she arrived later when I was lying on the scythings, eating my bait. It was long grass all around.

"Don't fret," says she.

I said nothing.

"The coast is clear," she says, and comes down on me like a ton of bricks. I couldn't see nothing but grass. There was such a rocking. I couldn't tell whether I was babe or man.

At tea-time the women went rushing home with their aprons full of apples--shrieking, you can be sure. They shruck a bit more when they saw me and a couple of them rang their bike bells. My old woman shouted, "Don't torment him! He's like his old watch--not so bad when he's wound up!" Laugh! You should have heard them!

It was my first time.

Christ, that was a summer and no mistake.

MARIAN CATER-EDWARDS, 50, Samaritan: *I'm fond of the old widowed men who sit quietly in their houses. Most of them aren't so much wanting food, or whatever, as for a talk. I feel so guilty. I chat my way*

through a quick cup of tea and they've got a look on their dear old faces like Bessie here, just longing for you to go on and on. I skip the groaners. It really does take it out of you to be groaned and moaned at. I like the ones who say, "Well, that's life!"

TERRY LLOYD, 21, Pig-farmer: *I have dinner at twelve, do all kinds of jobs until half-past four, then it's feeding again. I have tea at six and at eleven, just before I tuck in myself, I have a walk round to see if everybody is cosy. Pigs are funny animals and like a sense of being cared for.*

ANTHONY SUMMER, 23, Shepherd: *I castrate the male lambs, the little tups, about an hour after they have been born. They say what you've never had, you never miss. I wonder.*

ROGER ADLARD, 31, Factory Farmer: *Pigs are very clean animals but, like us, they are all different; some will need cleaning out after half a day and some will be neat and tidy after three days. Some pigs are always in a mess and won't care. Pigs are very interesting people and some of them can leave quite a gap when they go off to the bacon factory.*

There are an awful lot of petition going about concerned with cruelty to animals. They are usually got up by people who keep pets confined in flats and I am not sure that such folk are entitled to hold these opinions.

THE POET, Himself: *They say that I have opted out. That is what they say. I am out of all the great events of the day--or so they tell me. The accusers come yearly and usually in the summer, for none of these kind of people have patience with a village in winter, and they point their finger at me for having turned my back on what they call current affairs. They tell me that a poet should not avoid what is going on in the world. A poet should be with the mass of mankind, they say; a poet should carry a banner. I do not march, I do not protest, I have not the people's cause at heart--so I am guilty! I do not argue about the colour question or the religious question. I am a guilty innocent, I suppose. Can one be that?*

WILLIAM RUSS, 61, Gravedigger: *Bodies used to be kept in the house for twelve days. Everyone kept the body at home for as long as they could then; they didn't care to part with it, you see. Now they can't get it out quick enough. They didn't like hurrying about anything when I was young, particularly about death. They were afraid that the corpse might still be alive--that was the real reason for hanging on to it. People have a post-mortem now and it's all settled in a minute, but there's no doubt that years ago there were a rare lot of folk who got buried alive. When a sick man passed on the doctor was told, but he never came to look at the corpse. He just wrote out the death certificate. People always made a point of leaving an instruction in their wills to have a vein cut. Just to be on the safe side.*

I talk too much, that is my failing. I come into contact with many people at a serious time, so I have picked up serious conversation. What most folk have once or twice in a lifetime, I have every day. I want to be cremated and my ashes thrown in the air. Straight from the flames to the winds, and let that be that.

Julie says

This book was published in the 60's and is an oral history of a typical village in east Anglia, the author took a wide range of ages and occupations from people who live there. It was very poignant when the older generation talked of the 1st world war and all the young men went off to the army for adventure and sadly, virtually the whole generation of young men were wiped out with maybe only 1 or 2 returning. The older generation spoke of the virtual slave labour of working on the farms and the low wages, bad conditions, no

rights. Living conditions were appalling with the idea of the country cottages with roses around the door and picket fences blown out of the water, cottages had no electricity or running water or sanitation, and if you lost your jobs you lost your tied cottage. The only other job villages could expect was to go and work up at the "big house " another brand of slave labour. The book shows how after the war especially the 2nd world war how ideas and expectations changed and people wanted more security and workers wanted rights and how as in the towns unions started to gain footholds. The young people seemed to be the ones who harked back to the ideas of the old times perhaps romantising them as time has gone on , while the older people remembered the 7 days a week 14 hour plus days work and were happy to embrace changes. The 60s was also obviously the start of intensive farming and one of the farmers while quite happy to keep battery hens was regretful about the intensive farming of pigs as they were intelligent animals! but still managed to justify it! We seem to have come a complete circle with people now turning against intensive farms. I enjoyed this book and you could almost hear the people speaking in their suffolk dialect as you read, and it did make you think about the changes most villages have gone through in the last few decades.

knig says

Having a puta of a day? Mayhap the carburettor finally conked. (On the M25, where else?). Perhaps as one is artfully manoeuvring between two lanes and so blocks both, the other two of course being cordoned off for road works, whose estimated completion may or may not supersede the Apocalypse. Manage to survive the road rage just before you're road kill, rush to work: Is that Fat Nelly with your coffee cup, AGAIN, because she probably ate hers for breakfast? Hell, coffee is overrated anyway. But wait, the tights have won at 'snakes and ladders' yet again just before the ten o'clock and the blackberry has gone into lockdown: no amount of coaxing is gonna get that baby up and running for the presentation. Which you don't have anyway because the dog ate your homework. And it only 10.30 in the morning: is life even worth it?

Wait, don't dial a friend: no one wants to hear your shit anyway. Instead open up Akenfield (obviously prop it between the quarterly sales ledger and put a few furrows on your forehead for authenticity). This stuff is way better than therapy, and needless to say, cheaper. Who can fail to feel assuaged and cocooned in a feel-good miasma after reading about the totally crappy, senseless, pointless, exploited lives of Ackenfiled's residents in the early 20c. In as much as everyone needs a smaller flea to pick on, this here is the ultimate jackpot. The sheer degradation, humiliation, poverty and ignorance on display are not without their wow factor. Yes, of course, we all know it was tough back in the day, but following this docudrama as residents recall their lives (the book was published in 1960), had me hook, line and sinker. I now understand (a little bit) how anyone can watch Big Brother: am I not as guilty in immersing in these wretched lives and lapping it all up in a show of gross voyeurism?

The lives rendered bare are too many to recount: go read them yourself. The message I take with me though is that if despite all their hardships these people somehow managed to cherish life and find happiness, then I have no excuse for sitting on the moaning mini chair. (Although I can kvetch standing up, too....)

Jake Goretzki says

Superb documentary. It's slow moving at times (those slow talking farmers and their yields), but rewarding.

It's all taken at a fascinating juncture in history (end of the sixties). Memories of the thirties are still fresh;

survivors of WW1 are still knocking around; long hair and liberalism are starting to invade and paternalism is disappearing (they're still a bunch of Tories, mind). The best accounts are those of the relative outsiders - the schoolteachers in particular with their take on the dyed-in insularity of the locals.

Many of the dynamics seem not to have changed much either: newcomers still fantasise about 'country living' and community (a massive British fetish it is too); retired bankers play the squire. Lost England - but very present England too.

John says

A snapshot c. 1968 of life in an anonymised rural community south of Ipswich, Suffolk, UK. The village is given the fictional name of Akenfield. It is largely told through the words of many villagers and people who work there (but may live elsewhere), interviewed by Blythe. His introductions to them and his interpretations of their words and memories are always perceptive.

The people being interviewed cover 2 or 3 generations varying from age 17 to almost 90 so we see the place and hear the shared experiences from many perspectives. Some can describe a time when Victoria was still on the throne, others born after World War II have a very different story to tell.

Some of the stories are more memorable than others. Taken altogether it is a vast pool of information for anyone interested in rural life in England 1880ish – 1970. It is also extremely interesting and at times very entertaining and moving.

Yasmin Ward says

This is a beautiful insight into village life. It is full of prose. The transcribed interviews of the villagers have a quality of simplicity and stillness that seems to come from the villagers acceptance of life and connection with the land and its natural cycle.

Blythe's introductory descriptions of each villager, before the transcribed interviews, are an excellent lesson in character development. He has a way of describing people's physicality and character that is intricate, visceral and contains a kind of profound and distant love for the people of his homeland.

I highly recommend Akenfield as a refreshing antidote to the over-done urban-centric view and a tender and thoughtful representation of rural life.

Edward Wakefield says

As a portrait of small, countryside life this is as good as it gets. Reading like a poetic primer for all things rural - everything from bell ringing to barn dances this will subtly tug at your spirit, delivering you from the urban horrors!

Melissa says

I received an ARC from the publisher.

This book is a history of the British village of Akenfield in Suffolk, England as told through the stories and narratives of its own citizens. Blythe interviewed 49 different people from all types of social backgrounds and occupations and recorded their words for this social history. In 1967, the year in which the villagers are interviewed, the way of life in this small village is changing from one of manual labor to mechanization. Each person from Akenfield that is interviewed by the author highlights different aspects of his or her life in a forthright, honest and stream-of-consciousness narrative. Blythe groups the book into twenty different sections of the people, some of which include "God," "The Craftsmen," "The School," and "The Law."

One group in the book that made a particular impression on me were the craftsmen such as the wheelwright, the blacksmith and the thatcher. It would seem that with the invention of cars that there would no longer be a need for such talents because of the shrinking reliance on horses and wagons for transportation. It was inspiring that these hardworking men decide to change with the times and find other uses for their crafts. The blacksmith, Francis Lambert age twenty-five, is a very talented craftsman and now that there are no longer horses to shoe in order to sustain his business he has diversified by making weather-vanes, gates and fire-screens. Francis is so talented that he is even sent to Germany to represent England at an international craft festival. Francis loves his job which is evident by the fact that he usually puts in sixty hours of work per week and he takes a great deal of pride in his masterpieces.

As one would expect, hopes of escaping the village are expressed from some of the residents, but for the most part they seem content to stay in their small part of England. Several of them mention that their families have resided within the boundaries of Akenfield for generations. But there are also a fair number of voices we hear from people who, even though that have lived in Akenfield for many years, will always be considered "outsiders" because they were born elsewhere. Hugh Hambling age thirty who is a schoolmaster tells us that he was born on Norfolk. He and his wife move to Akenfield when he was twenty because he found a charming cottage that the newly married couple could afford. Hugh feels that the villagers are very private people and although he tries to engage them in discussions, he only ever is able to talk to them about cursory things like football or the weather.

In the section on the school, Blythe includes the administrative records from the teachers and headmasters which date back to 1875. One problem, in particular, that teachers have to deal with is poor attendance by the children of farm owners. There are certain times of the year when even the young ones are needed to be out in the fields helping with the crop and later when a truancy law is passed these guidelines for school attendance are still not enforced. Outbreaks of health issues such as ringworm, diphtheria and scarlet fever are also recorded and must have certainly worsened the poor attendance issues.

Many of the details that the residents of Akenfield provide are like no other that one would find in any ordinary history book. The orchard worker, for instance, gives us a detailed accounts of different apples that are best grown in the English climate and what the prime picking time is for each breed. The thatcher provides a lengthy description of the best way to thatch a roof and which are the best materials to use. I found the section on the bell-ringers particularly fascinating; these young men are in a way considered talented musicians and go around to village and neighborhood churches in order to practice their craft of bell-ringing. I had no idea before reading this history that there is such a fine art form to the ringing of

church bells.

This is a charming, interesting, candid glimpse into the pulse and essence of an English village in the middle of the 20th century. If you have any interest in British history, oral history or social history then this latest edition to the New York Review of Books classic titles is a must read.

Gary Land says

A surprisingly interesting book, Akenfeld is a oral history of a small English agricultural village. The author, a poet, says that he didn't know what an oral history was when he conducted these interviews in the mid-1960s. Nonetheless, they communicate well the changes that the first half of the twentieth century, with its world wars, industrial farming, and changing mores, brought to an isolated and traditional community.

Tara says

The folk of Akenfeld circa 1910 had a basic understanding of the necessities required for a community to survive. They could have understood and talked to people from a hundred years earlier, and a hundred years before that, and a hundred years before that, and so on.

In the course of the past century, that understanding has been decimated. You may watch the process unfold in Akefield: most fascinating of all is to watch the old-timers talk about the lack of money when they were children, and then the sudden abundance. Where did it come from? What makes money? Who was suddenly doing the actual wealth-creating work when the people of England became professionalized after the Second World War?

I highly recommend pairing this with "The Village Laborer" by J.L. Hammond and the works of R.H. Tawney.

Beyond that, the book is beautiful simply for the glimpses it gives into the lives of our neighbors (removed though they be in time and space). One of my favorite passages is the old man complaining he has had no pleasure in his life, and then suddenly remembers all the singing from his childhood. "So I lied. I have had pleasure. I have had singing." Absolutely wonderful book.

Anyia says

Fascinating series of first person character studies, portraying a wide range of people in one Suffolk village. The author states that it's based on a real place and real people, and I almost couldn't tell where fact ended and fiction began. Weirdly original, and occasionally uncomfortable, social commentary - undefensive, and nonjudgmental of its characters, even when you might think a little judgment is warranted. This was written in the 60s but still feels relevant, especially if you live in this area.

Stephanie Bradley says

I LOVE this book!

It has had me completely engrossed - I took my time because I didn't want to stop reading the tales of the folk of the 60s in a little SE English village.

There is so much of value in this book - all the answers you can possibly want for where we went wrong as a society seen through the eyes of the folk who lived through the changes - the ones who appreciated some of them and the ones who didn't and the ones who were perceptive enough to see them for what they were, good and bad, and how they came about in the aftermath of 2 world wars.

From the voices of ordinary folk come truths we don't often hear in our society of expert-speak. What a relief!

I guess my dream now is to meet the author - he has done what in a sense I was attempting about Our times, in my book, "Tales of Our Times". The strength that comes from hearing people's voices as they lived it is invaluable to our learning of the past. I adored "Larkrise to Candleford" - but Arkenfield surpasses it simply because there are more voices - so more stories!

What I am really excited about is that if we read Larkrise and then Arkenfield we are given a picture of England that wasn't written from the perspective of the wealthy or well connected and that somehow, makes all the difference.

Bravo Ronald Blythe!
