

The Man Who Asked ‘The Fellows Who Cut The Hay’

Maureen James looks at the life and work of George Ewart Evans

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George Ewart Evans was a pioneer in the field of oral history (or ‘spoken history’ as he preferred to call it) who from the 1950s recorded interviews with people in rural areas. He taped interviews with many people including blacksmiths, ploughmen, drovers and shepherds and edited the results into a number of books including ‘Where Beards Wag All’ and ‘Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay’. In these books the voices of the past can almost be heard explaining the customs and ways of life that were fast disappearing.

George, the son of a grocer, was born on 1st April 1909, in the mining town of Abercynon, South Wales. During his childhood, he observed at firsthand the struggles of a mining community, during the years of depression. He observed the affects of mining disasters, strikes, and most poignantly the loss of his father’s shop and the experience of his father’s bankruptcy. These trials set in his mind a belief in the principles of communism as a way of ending social inequalities.

As a boy, George attended Mountain Ash School and went on to graduate from University College, Cardiff, in 1931, with an honours degree in Classics and a teaching certificate. He was unsure about pursuing the teaching career, particularly if he was not to be teaching his main subject and so for a few years, he was a victim of the spreading mass unemployment. But George was athletic, distinguishing himself on the rugby field, and also on the athletics track. He found if he sprinted professionally he could ease his financial situation somewhat.

At about this time George discovered a love of writing, and after winning a prize for his first published work, a translation of Catullus, in the Sunday Referee in 1934, he tried unsuccessfully, to pursue a writing career. Eventually, after retraining to teach physical education, to fill the increasing demand for a fitter population, George managed to obtain a post as an athletics teacher at Sawston Village College, an experimental school in Cambridgeshire.

This pioneering school, founded by Henry Morris, was seen as ‘a new institution for the English countryside, one which would take all the various vital but isolated activities in village life - the school, the village hall and reading room, the evening classes and bring them together’. Henry hoped to stop the decline of villages as children travelled to the town for their secondary education. He planned that each college would serve a group of surrounding villages and provide a traditional education for 11-15 year olds, plus a range of evening and weekend classes and activities for students of all ages.

The experience of teaching at Sawston was to add to a burgeoning interest in the revitalisation of village life. It was also at this school that George met Florence Ellen Knappet, a fellow teacher and a Quaker. In 1938, they married, and as was expected at the time, Florence gave up her teaching career. The couple went searching for a house to settle in also started their family, which was in time to comprise four children, Jane, Susan, Mary, and Matthew. The latter was later to pursue a distinguished career with the publishing company Faber and Faber.

During the Second World War George joined the RAF, where he trained in radio and electrics, but due to a medical condition that meant his hearing was defective, he remained in Britain working on the technical maintenance of planes at bases around the country and in Scotland. Whilst on active service he wrote a number of short stories and poetry, some of which were republished in 1975 in a collection titled 'Let Dogs Delight'. He also wrote 'The Voices of the Children', an account of his childhood in the South Wales valleys.

When the war ended, George lived for a short time with his young family in Edmonton London, where he taught English in what he described as a 'three-storey barracks of a school, a bleak nineteenth century learning-factory'. He realised how much he missed the countryside and in 1948 the family moved to Blaxhall in Suffolk, where Florence had been appointed as village schoolmistress and they could live in tied accommodation.

Blaxhall on the Suffolk coast was a complete contrast to the hills and valleys of Wales. It was a flat arable region where the old farming methods were being revolutionised and mechanisation taking hold. When George took on the task of assisting with a 'Festival of Britain' exhibition in 1951 he observed how the exhibition got the old people talking, and when they talked they used the 'old' language, a language rich in words and expressions previously only known to him from reading old English poetry. George became obsessed with finding out more.

He talked with his neighbours, most of whom were agricultural labourers, born before the turn of the century, who had worked on farms before the arrival of mechanisation, and found that men and women who were born after 1890 differed from those born earlier. Their language had lost a great deal of its tactile nature with much of its visual imagery. The older people were much easier to listen to as they included "images that a listener finds so easy to translate and give visual form to as he concentrates on what the speaker describes".

George began to record the dialect and to collect rural customs, traditions and folklore, first in Blaxhall, and then Helmingham and Needham Market in Suffolk, and Brooke, near Norwich. His tape-recordings, reinforced by careful research of historical and literary sources, provided the background for his books in which he explored the theory that events around the time of the First World War created a watershed in Britain – "A rural culture that had preserved its continuity from the earliest times ... was swept aside in less than a couple of generations." He believed that the end of horse agriculture and the beginning of machine farming was a vital transition – "I felt it especially important to record the feeling of farm people about the new era that was just beginning, for the reason that they were living through the greatest revolution in farming since Neolithic times."

George noticed that whilst in some parts of the country industry had absorbed the local unemployment brought about by the mechanisation of farming, in East Anglia there was little alternative employment and so many young people left the region. He also saw how professionals and retired military officers were moving out from the towns to settle in the countryside, and how they took over influential positions on local councils.

As he travelled around, George also found that the working people who had come to maturity under the ‘old culture’ differed, not just in their use of language but also in their lore and values which the younger generations were sceptical or dismissive about. He was particularly interested in ‘horse magic’ and the ability of some people to ‘Jade’ or ‘draw’ a horse.

George became fascinated by ‘Jading’ (the ability to make a horse stand as though it was bewitched or paralysed) and ‘drawing’ (when a horseman calls a horse to him). Both these practices depended on the cunning use of herbs and oils and an appreciation of the horse’s sense of smell. Those that wished to be able to jade a horse had to possess a frog or toad’s bone that had been gathered in a carefully controlled way. George collected accounts of how such people had to kill a ‘walking toad’, dry it, bury it in an ant-hill for a month, and then retrieve its skeleton under a full moon, before releasing it into a stream.

In a similar way, George collected together all the myths and legends connected with Hare’s and published them in a book entitled ‘the Leaping Hare’. But it was this emphasis on the more magical aspects of his research that came in for criticism from the academic world. In ‘The Days That We Have Seen’, he commented that

“the reader will ask at this stage: ‘Is all this magical and mystical stuff worth recording!’ or as I have often been asked myself: ‘Do you really believe in it?’ But these questions miss the point. The relevant question should be ‘Did the participants, the horsemen themselves, really believe in it?’ The answer is emphatically, ‘Yes, they did!’ It was through believing in it implicitly that they got their power and their results...”

George saw himself more as a creative artist than an historian and described his influences as Robert Graves, and modern artists such as Picasso who, ‘went back to the primitive for explanation and have found guidance’. He believed that ‘the main components of history are not things but people’ and the underlying theme of his books was people and change. He believed that it was vitally important to listen to what the people had to say– to actually ‘ask the fellows who cut the hay’.

By the 1960s George had become influential in persuading many people to start collecting oral history in 1969 he became a founding member of the Oral History Society. His tape recordings formed the basis of radio scripts for features broadcast on the BBC Third Programme. George also became a tutor for the Extra-mural Department of the University of Cambridge and the WEA in East Anglia. In 1982 his contribution to oral history and education was acknowledged by the Universities of Essex and Keele, both of whom awarded him honorary doctorates.

George died in January 1988 and recently his family donated a collection of his books to a storytelling centre, named in his memory. The George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling at the University of Glamorgan is dedicated to promoting, developing and researching storytelling in all its forms.

But the work of collecting ‘spoken history’ in East Anglia is not over. For many years now, a retired Auctioneer, Neil Lanham has been recording the songs and stories from the musical traditions of parts of Suffolk. Neil believes passionately that “across the region a wealth of wisdom has been passed down by word of mouth. These stories and songs are our heritage and should be treasured. They are our traditional way of passing wisdom. Modern speech passes little more than information”. Neil has put his recordings onto a selection of CDs, videos, and DVDs and they are available for purchase from <http://www.traditionsofsuffolk.com/>.

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Web resources

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<http://www.archivesnetworkwales.info/search/thesaurus/persons/list4.shtml>

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<http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/news/pdf/issue3.pdf>

Blaxhall

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