

## CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of a meeting held chez Jennifer on 31st March 2022

PRESENT: Jennifer, Viv, Pauline, Caroline, Rosemary, Gill, Robert, Neil, Biddy, Peter, Brian

APOLOGIES: Richard, Georges, Judith, Deborah, Diana

BOOK: "English Pastoral" by James Rebanks. The author, who was born in 1974, was brought up on his parents' mixed Lakeland hill farm. He left school with 2 GCSEs to help on the farm, but thanks to a further educational college in Carlisle, in his 20s went to Oxford, from which he emerged with a double first in history. He still farms the family farm and his book is an emotional evocation of the hardships and relentless work of that type of agriculture coupled with something of a plea for retention of some of the old ways

Rebanks says that he wouldn't win any prizes for farming, make money or feed the world but can contribute. Georges (by email) felt he didn't intend presenting a closely argued analysis, but rather to stir the spirit by using anecdote. Neil had grown up on a farm and thought that when so close to the action, you don't at first understand the importance of many of the things that were done and Biddy thought the writing itself very good. For Robert, the author is very nostalgic - things have changed completely, and the author would like to go back. Robert had not ploughed for 10 years and the new methods make a huge difference - whereas at one time he would have regarded 5t./hectars yield as very good, now it is 15t from the same land - down to plant breeding and fertilisers. For Jennifer, Rebanks' "pulling himself up by the bootlaces" educationally was remarkable - but Viv pointed out that agriculturally he was only making ends meet.

For Georges, Rebanks was documenting a change from farming as a means of making money to stewardship of the land. That had to be paid for by the public, and would necessarily involve animals - nice said Robert, but where does the capital cost of them come from - and who looks after them? Caroline spoke of the importance of location in farming and Viv of the disastrous canalisation of rivers and becks in the 50s leading to flooding downstream and loss of muddy bits for insects to enjoy - all of which no doubt accounted for the fact that Georges used to arrive in Northumberland barely able to see through his windscreen for the veritable mortuary of little legs and wings stuck there - whereas now it's tragically clean. Viv was struck by the reference to streams now being "unstraightened" to re-create the previous conditions and mentioned a recent Rotary farming speaker whose theme had been similar.

Would housewives be willing (or able) to pay higher prices for British produce? - Biddy recalled her parents paying 30% of their income for food in the 60s. Gill would insist on British beef and years ago lived very well on a Welsh hill farm - but if she had a family to feed? Robert thought Rebanks confused food policy with social policy and mentioned when in Derbyshire he had seen few sheep but a lot of ragwort which they had previously kept down. He contrasted the basic payments under the EU with the current gov't's Environmental Land management schemes (ELMS). Caroline had heard a radio programme in which the Australians were speaking of their agricultural standards but Robert said they operated in a different environment. Rebanks type of farming, for which he had some sympathy was totally uneconomic. He told us the biggest farmers in this country were now Dyson, the Mormons and other religious bodies. Peter suggested the author was just a hobby farmer. Viv brought up re-wilding, and mentioned Knepp Castle farm in Sussex, though Robert then reminded us of "Cold Comfort Farm" but Biddy said the book held attention. We agreed a score of 8/9 fair

OTHER READS: Neil "The Splendid and the Vile" - Erik Larson, "The Last Empire" - Serhi Plokhy, "Wolf Pack" - C J Box, Crusader Cross "Scott Mariani", "My story" Roger Dattray. Biddy - "Maid" Stephanie Land, "Under another sky" - journeys through Roman Britain - Charlotte Higgins. Viv - John Banville "The Snow" - about an Irish detective, David Williams? Britain, "The Kingdom- How to make the world wake up" - Tim Harford. Caroline - Mary Beard - 12 Caesars, Elena Ferrante -

one of the Neapolitan novels, Tolstoy - "War and Peace". Rosemary - finished Zorba, a book by Val McDermott who has a low opinion of human nature. Robert - "Decline & Fall" - Evelyn Waugh, TV "Black Mischief", re-reading Robinson Crusoe - had forgotten how good it is. Jennifer - some mysteries which were "absolute rubbish"; Barbara Pym - an academic question. Pauline - called it light stuff - "The Apothecary's daughter" - Charlotte Betts, "Lily" - Rose Tremaine, Jojo Moyes "Sheltering Rain" - about horseracing in Hong Kong Brian - "A Prince and a Spy" = Rory Clements - clichéd, Gavin Esler "How Britain Ends"

THINGS DONE: Rosemary - Faberge exhibition at the V & N AS P fab, live streaming of "Rigoletto" from Covent Garden at the Curzon and Matthew Burn's "Nutcracker" at the Marlowe which was - well, cracking. Gill - films - Belfast" and "The Duke" which was hilarious - Peter agreed. Robert has a new career as a fillum star - well, an extra for now, but who knows, and gave us a thrilling account of rubbing shoulders with the likes of Dominic Cum berbatch. He is about to visit the Normandy beaches too. Neil had been with the local history association to the Malthouse where they heard a superb talk by Sir Anthony Beevor on WW11. Pauline had been to see "Singing in the Rain" at the Marlowe, sat in the front row - and got wet. Caroline had been to the new exhibition at the Turner Gallery, Margate - has a number of Turners and other paintings and is worth a visit. also Sissinghurst - also worth a visit although things were not fully out - and a visit to the Piece Hall in Halifax where they used to sell cloth. Viv said he had lost the habit of going out during lockdown. I had a fascinating visit to the Stonehenge exhibition in the British Museum.

A FAREWELL: For the greater part of the last 12 years, Jennifer has been our unfailingly generous and easy-going host, but has decided to live in Poole to be near her son Chris. The exact date of her departure had not been fixed at the time of the meeting, but was likely to be before our next meeting so, very sadly this would be the last meeting in her house. We all wished her well and presented her with flowers and 2 books - "Stealing from the Saracens" by Diana Darke and "the Language of flowers" by Mandy Kirkby - the gifts of us all.

DONM: Thursday 26th May 11.0am chez Pauline at 32 Nunnery Fields CT1 3JT. tel 01227 761758. be parked on her driveway which is alongside her house. Book "Vanity Fair" - - to the end of Ch XXV