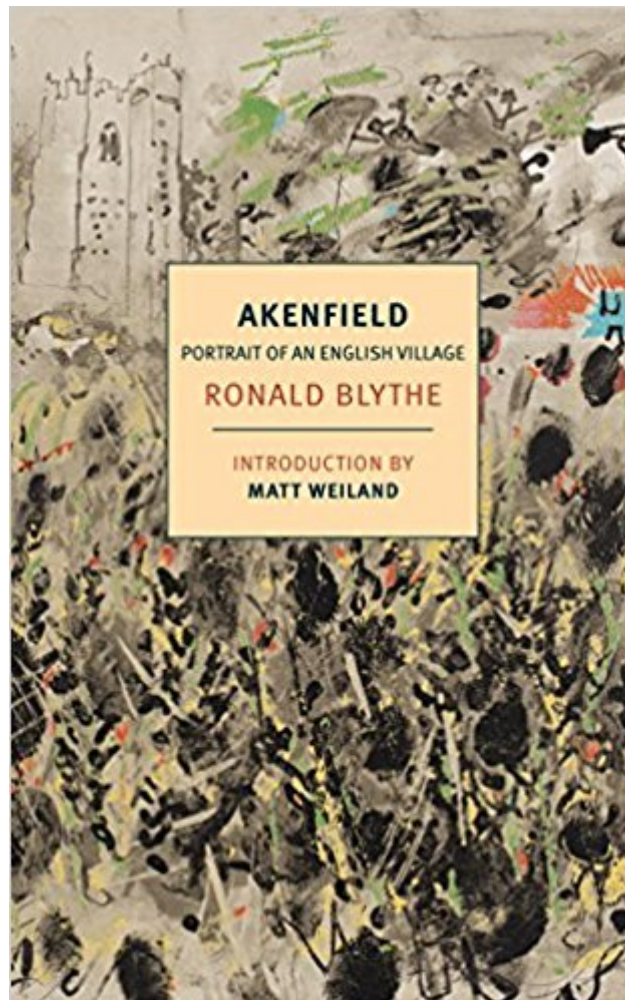




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Akenfield: Portrait Of An English Village



Synopsis

Woven from the words of the inhabitants of a small Suffolk village in the 1960s, *Akenfield* is a masterpiece of twentieth-century English literature, a scrupulously observed and deeply affecting portrait of a place and people and a now vanished way of life. Ronald Blythe's wonderful book raises enduring questions about the relations between memory and modernity, nature and human nature, silence and speech.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The fens are the West Virginia of England, a place of cousin marriage and quaint customs that died out in the 19th century elsewhere. Thus, the satirical comic *Viz* could count on a cheap laugh by portraying a band of identical dwarves as the "Much-Incest-in-the-Marsh Morris Dancers." And that in the 21st century. The thing is, the stereotype has truth in it. Less now than when Ronald Blythe wrote his well-regarded, and very frank, oral history of "*Akenfield*" half a century ago. But some authenticity, nevertheless. That part of Suffolk is watered by the River Blythe, and the author's surname gives away that he is a fenlander himself. It is unlikely he could have gotten the villagers to talk so openly to an outsider. His theme is nothing so crass as the English version of West Virginia hillbillies. "*Akenfield*" is about everything but about class above all. You will not find many ill words about the Anti-Corn Law League, but the repeal of protection and, later, the gold standard devastated rural England. Nowhere more so than in Suffolk. The farmers started losing money, probably, by the 1870s, if not earlier, and they continued to lose money for nearly a century. As is always the case with property holders, they passed as much of the pain to labor as they could. And

in Akenfield, they passed most of it down. Leonard Thompson, a farm laborer born about 1896, told Blythe: "I want to say this simply as a fact, that village people in Suffolk in my day were worked to death. It literally happened. It is not a figure of speech. I was worked mercilessly. I am not complaining about it. It is what happened to me." Following a short revival during World War I, the interwar period was a starving time for Akenfield cottagers. It broke their spirit, Blythe says. The men became fearful. Losing a job meant, usually, losing the roof over your head, because of the "tied-cottage" system. The women were more self-confident, but the men were utterly demoralized. David Collyer, a young forester and Labor Party organizer, told Blythe, "The women never lost their independence during the bad days as the men did." (His statement resonates with me, a Southerner, who observed a like distinction among oppressed blacks.) The men did, to some extent, pass down the rural crafts, a vast body of knowledge that Blythe emphasizes is undervalued - when recognized at all - by city folk. As late as 1969, there was a wheelwright in Akenfield making farm carts. By the mid-1960s, when Blythe conducted his investigations, the younger men were beginning to believe they did not have to do what the landlords told them. But they did not want to stay in Akenfield. Before then, the cottagers were virtually serfs. The combination of landlord, parson and JP ordered the young people where to work and whom to work for. One of the frankest statements of conditions comes from Marjorie Jope, a district nurse from the '20s. An outsider, she nevertheless entered the cottages, at births, deaths and sicknesses, and saw things that the landlord, the parson and the JP might have suspected but never knew about for sure. Americans who have been trained to despise the National Health should read her statement. They will have to change their minds, if they have any humanity at all. The idyllic English village was not where she worked. Her clients were starved, dirty and sick: "Children have never been as beautiful as they are now. The old people were not taken care of." In fact, they were sometimes just left to die.

Ethnography with a Heart for England, its villages and people. Set in 1967, shows how times were changing middle of last century, village to suburb, farming to manufacturing, walking or riding and talking to driving, TV, more individualism, hard-times to consumerism. Interesting given our changes now due to the internet and technology.

Extremely interesting and moving account of the massive changes that have occurred in rural England over the past hundred years. The insights provided by this book have wide application in our strange and scary world. John Bate

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