

MELVYN BRAGG ON THE HIRED MAN

My paternal grandfather died in 1970. I would guess that he had never read a book in the twentieth century. He left school at the end of the nineteenth century when Queen Victoria sat securely on a vast Empire, rich and varied beyond belief. His part in it – like that of the majority of people in this Country – was humble; he worked. First on the land, where, like many farm labourers, his exhausting working life was in some way relieved by his love for the horses he worked with and the landscape he saw every day. Then as a miner, where close friendships gave some relief. Like so many others of his generation he was swept up into the First World War; unlike many others – including some of his brothers – he survived it to come back to a land which promised nothing but more sweated labour. A few years after that war, his wife died leaving him with four children; he had four more by his second wife.

As my father was away in World War Two – I was born a month after it broke out – I might have seen, in my grandfather, someone who stood for both himself and for my own absent father. I was certainly close to him and despite his sternness and occasional flaring bad temper, I liked seeing him. I was the first in my family to stay on at school and when I went to university that both baffled and delighted him. I became a prize subject for teasing – an occupation he greatly enjoyed. When I began to publish novels he had a field day.

One day at the end of the sixties I went to see him and was shocked to realise that he knew he would soon die. He never said anything of course. Nor did I; not about that. He complained a bit about his legs; not much, but the lack of mobility profoundly upset the order of a man who had measured out his working life in physical effort. He said nothing at all about the arthritis crippling his hands. His pale blue eyes still teased away at my latest comical episode – joining the BBC this time. But I knew, without question, that he was going to die.

Afterwards I went for a long walk around the Cumbrian town in which I had been brought up – the town in which he had lived all my lifespan. I decided to write a book 'about' him.

This turned into *The Hired Man*. Once the book started, then a few facts I knew about him were revealed as no more than a starting point. About this relationship with his first wife, to take just one example, I knew nothing; the description presented in *The Hired Man* is a total fiction. What remains in the outline of the facts of his life.

And the outline of the lives of tens, even hundreds of thousands of people of this Country in the first quarter of the twentieth century. What I wanted to do in the book was not only present the personal story of the sort of man whose life is so rarely written about, but also to chronicle and bring alive that cavalcade of British history which swept us into a new century and into a war to end all wars.

My grandfather used to play the melodian – the working mans accordian. He had a good voice; several of his children and grandchildren sang in choirs – still do, some of them. He would have loved Howard Goodall's music coming, as it does, out of that ancient English choral tradition which has influenced so many of our best twentieth century composers. It was the music which persuaded me to let the book be turned into something else. I had resisted its being filmed or televised or dramatised. The music, though – apart from its own qualities – fills out the feelings and completes many strong emotions unspoken in that walk of life. I wish the old lad could have lived to enjoy it.

Melvyn Bragg
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