

MENU

Saturday Review



Calling in the Gleaners by Jules Breton, 1859

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Remembering Peasants by Patrick Joyce review — the slow death of Europe's earth-toilers

Rural workers, the backbone of the land, are vanishing. But they won't go quietly

[John Lewis-Stempel](#)

Saturday February 17 2024, 12.01am, The Times

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It doesn't feel like the end of Europe's peasantry. I am writing this as a member of the 10,000-strong French Confédération Paysanne. And at a time when farmers are *en colère*, furiously blocking motorways with tractors, staging nude demos in supermarkets and besieging Paris in protest against low prices and reductions in diesel subsidies. My regional paper, Sud

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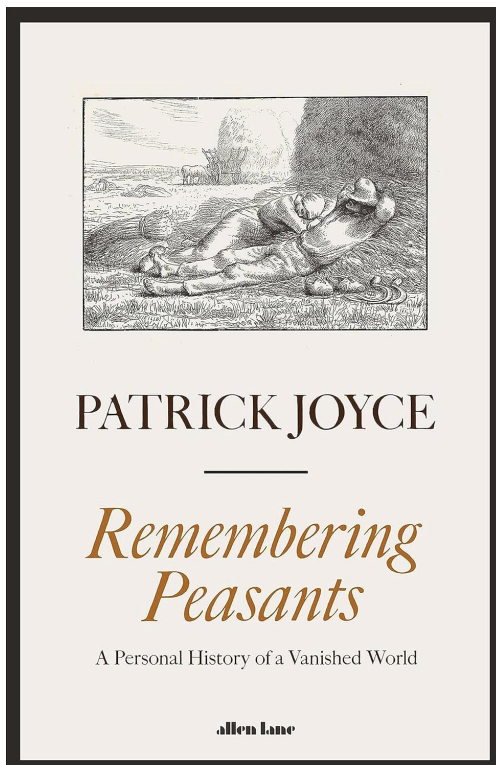
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Paris, Berlin or the Hague.

Patrick Joyce, an emeritus professor of history at Manchester University, will doubtless appreciate the irony of his heart-writ valediction to Europe's peasants appearing at such a moment, when the continent's farmers are revolting. The grandson of Irish small farmers, he knows the truth about this rural class: everything to do with them is awkward. So, typically, they refuse to follow the script and die off.

The EU "lost" (read liquidated) 37 per cent of its farms between 2005 and 2020 alone. Most of them were small — less than five hectares. The common agricultural policy was always geared to boost the industrialisation of agriculture at the expense of the peasantry. As recently as 1950 half of Spain's population were horny-handed sons and daughters of toil; today 5 per cent are land labourers. The most significant European reservoirs of peasantry are countries either late to join the EU or outside it. In Romania 22 per cent of the workforce is still engaged on the land.



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hick and rube. The contempt for the peasantry is ancient. The Old Testament sons of Canaan were condemned to rural servitude and Karl Marx, of course, did his bit with that taunt about the “the idiocy of rural life” in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Remembering Peasants is a work of salvage and salvation, a great rescuing of Europe's earth-toilers from historical neglect and erasure. Joyce is correct that peasantry is no socio-economic category but a “condition”, almost a state of mind — a peasant always believes the land to be his or hers regardless of legal technicalities. A Belarusian peasant asked in the mid-19th century about his identity replied: “I, Mister, am a local.” Every peasant is *placed* — they belong to a particular patch of land.

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To the peasant the land is a support, but it also breaks his back. This dilemma is perfectly captured in Jean-François Millet's 1860s painting *Man with a Hoe*, reproduced in this book. The exhausted subject is leaning on the Stone Age tool that literally joins him to the land. As well as support, the land is also a guarantee of poverty. Per-Jakez Hélias, the Breton peasant who wrote the 1975 memoir *The Horse of Pride*, turned into a film by Claude Chabrol, conceived poverty as an animal, lurking at one's side, “the World Bitch”.

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turns, but everything remains the same. Peasants were religious, as Joyce understands, because Christ suffered like they suffer — and the land is full of wonder, signs and omens, fairies and banshees. As Joyce notes, in peasant cosmology “man is not the king of creation”. But nature with a capital N, the new religion of the urban middle classes, is “a semantically empty category” as far as the peasant is concerned. For the peasant the natural world *is* the world, entire and encompassing, not something apart to be visited and viewed.



Man with a Hoe by Jean-François Millet, c. 1861

SEPIA TIMES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

Joyce is a propitious name for a writer of Irish heritage, but the author is more Heaney than *Dubliners*; his prose is peat-rich, dense with feeling as well as fact. And the fact of the matter is that the peasantry area threatened species. Georgian enclosures and agricapitalism removed most of England's peasants early on; the remnants were condemned to the fringes. Less than 1

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With the going of the peasants, as Joyce notes, has come silence. English villages are like mausoleums, full of commuters and second homeowners. Hail the rise of rural bland. As late as the 1980s in remote Herefordshire, where I grew up, the peasants still put the character in the landscape. Tom, the sheep farmer who doubled as the village milkman, had a .410 shotgun in the van cab so he could pot pheasants as he did his morning round, a rustic version of drive-by shooting. Percy, being unable to afford a toupee, covered his bald patch with brown boot polish, a glorious example of what Joyce calls the peasants' "limited order of consumption" or thrift.

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My favourite character, though, was Old Boy Pryce who kept a box of straw beside the Rayburn oven for his favourite goose to roost — and most definitely not roast — in. If any such characters still exist in England, they need a preservation order slapped on them.

The limitation of *Remembering Peasants*, apart from the premature death notice, is that Joyce is an observer in his grandparents' Wexford stone farmhouse; he was always the boy visiting from London, lying abed listening to the fireside chat in the kitchen next door. Only the practice of peasantry can communicate the joy of work well done, a compensation for the impenitence of peasant life. My grandfather's farm

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close to livestock explains Old Boy Pryce's love for his non-cooked goose.

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For the peasant, land is something to be “opened”, worked for food. The same is to be said about Joyce's landmark book. Damn the sense of an ending, though. There was a time when British governments, councils, charities, recognising the necessity of peasants as local producers and the backbone of rural community, funded smallholdings and allotments. Land reform, anyone? Meanwhile, here in France I've got a demonstration to attend. The peasants are revolting. We really are.

Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World by Patrick Joyce (Allen Lane, 400pp; £25). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

John Lewis-Stempel is the author of [Woodston: The Biography of an English Farm](#)

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