

NONFICTION

A Love Song to His Roots

In "Remembering Peasants," the historian Patrick Joyce presents a stirring elegy for a vanishing culture.

By Fintan O'Toole

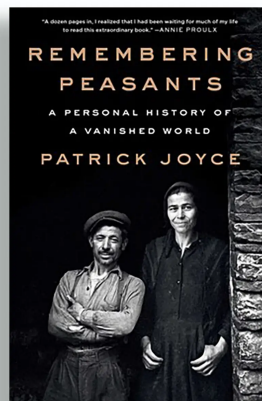
Fintan O'Toole is the author of "We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland."

Feb. 20, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET

REMEMBERING PEASANTS: A Personal History of a Vanished World, by Patrick Joyce

In 1970, when John Lennon wanted to denounce the bourgeoisie in his angry song "Working Class Hero," he delivered the ultimate insult: "You're still [expletive] peasants as far as I can see."

In French (*paysan*, *paysanne*), the word simply means "a country person." Yet almost all its synonyms are contemptuous: boor, bumpkin, churl, clodhopper, hillbilly, hayseed, hick, oaf, rube, yokel.



Most of the people who have lived on this planet since the invention of agriculture have been peasants. The word "human" is related to the Latin "humus," meaning earth or soil. And yet the full humanity of those who survive by working the land has been routinely denied.

The cultivators, it is often assumed, are dreadfully uncultivated. And this alleged lack of sophistication has made them fair game for every kind of depredation. The food they produce has been expropriated by their overlords, by marauding armies and by totalitarian states. They have been conscripted as cannon fodder; entangled in debt and dependency as sharecroppers and serfs; starved, sometimes deliberately, in famines and prisons; forcibly converted to their masters' religions; herded onto collective farms and slaughtered mercilessly when they revolt.

In "Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World" his moving and sensitive rumination on the historic fate of these earthbound people, Patrick Joyce quotes Ignazio Silone's summation, in his novel "Fontamara," of the hierarchy of existence as seen by the peasants of his native village in rural Italy. "At the head of everything is God." Then came the landowner, Prince Torlonia, followed by the prince's guards and then by his dogs. Below the dogs was "nothing at all." And under nothing at all were the *cafoni*, the poor peasants.

If peasants have been at the end of the line for power and respect, for thousands of years, they are now part of a great ending. Joyce's study is an elegy for a way of life, and a way of understanding the world, that is "part of a past we have now lost, lost in less than a single lifetime, lost with barely a sign of its loss in a present that is obsessed with itself."

He writes of Europe, but the same processes are at work everywhere. Around the world, a great driver of migration within and between countries is the desire to escape the peasant life.

Joyce, as he acknowledges frequently, is far from the first to note the epoch-making nature of this recent shift. In "The Age of Extremes," published in 1994, the great social historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote that "the most dramatic and far-reaching social change" of the second half of the 20th century, "and the one which cuts us off forever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry."

Joyce is himself a distinguished academic historian and emeritus professor of history at the University of Manchester. But what gives "Remembering Peasants" its distinctiveness and its depth is the import of that word "personal" in his subtitle. Its poignancy is intimate.

"As the London-born child of Irish rural immigrant parents, now a man of 78 years of age," Joyce writes, "I am a sort of relict of what we have lost. A relict that will in turn pretty soon be gone."

He examined the world of his father, who was born a poor peasant in County Mayo, in his wonderfully evocative memoir-history "Going to My Father's House," published in 2021, which captures in close-up the mental landscape that "Remembering Peasants" frames as a wide shot. In that earlier book, he described his task as "pleading on behalf of the dead and their unheard stories." "On behalf of" because very few of the countless millions who have eked a living from the land left enduring accounts of their own lives.

"This," Joyce wrote, "is a world of a very ancient form of silence, peasant silence, something enmeshed in cultures that are largely oral in nature." In this sense, Joyce is as much a necromancer, summoning the dead and bidding them speak, as he is a conventional historian.

He is also a kind of pilgrim. In "Remembering Peasants," as in his memoir, he embraces the idea of homage, a word that, as he put it in "Going to My Father's House," "involves the show of public respect."

Respect is not romanticization — Joyce is all too aware that the idealization of the peasantry from the 19th century onward as the embodiment of the nation's "blood and soil" is just another form of expropriation. What he seeks to explore is, rather, the cultural richness that these generations harvested, always against the odds, from the barren soil of oppression and contempt.

Drawing on the historical and anthropological records of the rural Ireland of his parents but also those of Poland and Italy, Joyce lures us into the collective mentalities of the European peasantry. He conjures their sense of time as cyclical and reversible. He reveals their very different understanding of nature. "The wild as our sublime," he writes, "makes no sense to the peasant." (Joyce cites a Polish peasant interviewed in the 1960s who said, "I like it where the plain is; when I was in America I saw a mountain, and this was an awful view.")

Much of Joyce's method is to meditate on old photographs to draw out the importance of bodies, physical objects, interior spaces, religion and ritual. He cites Susan Sontag: "Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art." "Remembering Peasants" is itself imbued with the diffuse and melancholy glow of a sinking sun.

Joyce shows how the supreme value of the peasant is generational survival: The great task is to hand on to the child the land the peasant has inherited, making one's own existence a kind of interlude between past and future. His beautifully written book is equally in-between, haunted by the ghosts of the dead but also full of the warmth of human sympathy. Returning to the little farm where his father was born, he thinks of "the throng of the invisible departed that once populated the hillside." His achievement is to leave them a little more visible, a little less silent.

REMEMBERING PEASANTS: A Personal History of a Vanished World | By Patrick Joyce | Scribner | 400 pp. | \$30