

We Field-Women

How it rained

When we worked at Flintcomb-Ash,
And could not stand upon the hill
Trimming swedes for the slicing-mill.
The wet washed through us – plash, plash, plash:
How it rained!

swedes – root vegetables

How it snowed

When we crossed from Flintcomb-Ash
To the Great Barn for drawing reed,
Since we could nowise chop a swede. –
Flakes in each doorway and casement-sash:
How it snowed!

pulling out long straw for thatching roofs
nowise – not at all (because the swedes were frozen)

How it shone

When we went from Flintcomb-Ash
To start at dairywork once more
In the laughing meads, with cows three-score,
And pails, and songs, and love – too rash:
How it shone!

meads – fields; threescore - sixty
pails – buckets for the milk

‘We Field-Women’ is one of the poems in *Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres*, published in October 1928 after Hardy’s death earlier in the year. Like at least one other of his poems, ‘Tess’s Lament’ published in 1901, it is based on his novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, 1891.

The poem is written as if spoken by one of the field-women working on the land through the seasons. She immediately refers to the farm where she is working, Flintcomb-Ash, which is a farm in Hardy’s novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. This is the place where Tess suffers so much with the hard manual labour she has to do to survive the winter. Hardy describes it as ‘the heavy and coarse pursuits which she liked least – work on arable land: work of such roughness, indeed, as she would never have deliberately volunteered for.’ It seems as if the poem is spoken by one of Tess’s friends. In the autumn the women work in the rain trimming swedes – that is, cutting off the knobs and lumps on the swedes so that they are a regular shape to slice for cattle food. In the winter they work inside the barn drawing reeds – drawing long pieces of wheat straw out of the straw rick so that they can be used for thatching roofs; in the summer they work with the cows in the fields.

The work is hard physical manual work and most of it is done out of doors. The woman speaking describes how they all got soaked through when they worked trimming the swedes:

The wet washed through us – plash, plash, plash:

How it rained!

The alliterated ‘wet washed’ emphasise how wet they got as does the relentless, continuous, repetitive ‘plash, plash, plash’ of the pouring rain. Hardy gives us the sound of the rain, too, with the onomatopoeiac ‘sh’ sounds in ‘washed’ and ‘plash’. You have the authentic voice of the Dorset

field-woman with a rather limited vocabulary, ‘plash, plash, plash,’ and dialect words like ‘nowise’ (in no way) and ‘drawing reed’. The sound of the rain and of the woman’s voice (later, the sound of the milkmaids’ songs) draw the reader into the world the woman is speaking of.

The exclamations which start and end each verse also emphasise the effect of the weather on the workers. ‘How it rained!’, ‘How it snowed!’, ‘How it shone!’ The weather dictates what work can be done; when the swedes are too frozen to cut with a billhook, the women move into the barn to work on the thatching straw. But even inside the Great Barn, the snowflakes fill the doorways and casement-sashes (windows) and the women are hardly protected from the bitter weather.

And maybe, too, there’s a feeling that the field-women are imprisoned in this cycle of work, autumn, winter, summer, year after year, with no escape, no progress, between the beginning and end of each verse. Each stanza ends as it began. Not only that, but the rhyme scheme goes abccba, as if there are triple prison walls around the workers. And the farm, Flintcomb-Ash, described in *Tess* as a starve-acre place (that is, a place that produces poor crops), seems to keep each stanza from moving anywhere. It dominates the stanza, even imposing itself on the rhyme scheme: ‘Flintcomb-Ash / plash, plash, plash; Flintcomb-Ash / casement-sash; and Flintcomb-Ash / too rash’. The run-on lines, too, perhaps suggest that there is no end to this work – not even at the end of the line of poetry.

How it rained
When we worked at Flintcomb-Ash,
And could not stand upon the hill
Trimming swedes for the slicing-mill.

The poem does end on a more cheerful note (unlike the novel, *Tess*, which ends tragically). In the summer it seems to be a pleasure to work outside in the sun, in the meadows which are ‘laughing’, with milk pails (the cows were milked out of doors in the meadows, not brought in to a milking parlour as they are nowadays), and it seems that the girls sang at the work, and rashly fell in love with other farm-workers. Again, this aspect of field-work is most beautifully described in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, in Chapter 17.

Overall, you can see, from reading the poem, why the ‘Ruined Maid’ ended up with hands like paws. And why the woman that Tess works with has to resort to drinking spirits to keep going. The ruined maid resorted, very understandably, to prostitution.

The work the women do needs a little explanation at this distance of time. If you read *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Chapter 17 describes the delightful dairy work in the summer and Chapters 42 and 43 describe the fairly desperate plight of the women working long hours in intolerable conditions during the autumn and winter. This poem starts with the trimming of swedes in the rain, presumably in the autumn or early winter when these root vegetables were ready to harvest. In *Tess*, Hardy graphically describes the work of the women. First, what it means to work all day in the pouring rain: ‘...to stand working slowly in a field, and feel the creep of rainwater, first in legs and shoulders, then on hips and head, then at back, front, and sides, and yet to work on ... demands a distinct modicum of stoicism, even of valour.’ (Stoicism means enduring pain and hardship without complaining; valour means courage.) Hardy continues with the business of the swede trimming: When it was not swede-grubbing it was swede-trimming, in which process they sliced off the earth and fibres with a bill-hook before storing the roots for future use ... if it

was frosty even their thick leather gloves could not prevent the frozen masses they handled from biting their fingers.' (A bill-hook is a sharp curved blade.) The reason the women cannot chop swedes in verse two is that the vegetables are frozen solid and this is why they move into the Great Barn for drawing reeds. Hardy describes drawing reeds in a short piece he wrote called *The Ancient Cottages of England*. He argues that the old practice of drawing reeds out of the straw rick makes them much better to use for thatching (roofing) than the modern way of using straw that has been threshed. To draw a reed is to prepare straw for use in thatching.

Hardy writes: 'I can recall another cottage .. which had been standing nearly 130 years, where the original external plaster is uninjured by weather, though it has been patched here and there; but the thatch has been renewed half a dozen times in the period. Had the thatch been of straw which had passed through a threshing machine in the modern way it would have required renewal twice as many times ... But formerly the thatching straw was drawn by hand from the ricks before threshing and, being unbruised, lasted twice as long, especially if not trimmed; though the thatcher usually liked to trim his work to make it look neater.' (from *The Ancient Cottages of England*, 1927)

Nearly a hundred years before Hardy wrote his essay, William Cobbett, famous for his books on country practices and ways, described the same thing in a letter. 'If this straw be reeded, as they do it in the counties of Dorset and Devon, it will last thirty years.' Reeds is the word used especially in the south west for wheat straw with the ears removed used especially for thatching because it has not been threshed. The process of threshing bruises and crushes the straw.

If you want to find out more about working conditions on Dorset farms, and see a copy of the original manuscript of *We Field-Women*, go to <https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/special-collections/featurehardypoem.pdf> This is an excellent website from Reading University's Museum of English Rural Life, not only featuring *We Field Women*, of which the University has a manuscript copy, but also containing some fascinating photographs of women working on farms at the time.

If you would like to see some Dorset dialect words, go to <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/barnes/william/rural/contents.html> which gives you a list of Dorset dialect words together with poems written by the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes. He lived near Hardy and was much respected by him.

The end of Chapter 42 and extracts from Chapter 43 of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* which describe swede-hacking and reed-drawing. It opens with a friend of Tess's, Marion, who is swede-hacking and warning her of how hard the work is.

"I took to drink. Lord, that's the only comfort I've got now! If you engage, you'll be set swede-hacking. That's what I be doing; but you won't like it."

"O--anything! Will you speak for me?"

"You will do better by speaking for yourself."

They walked on together and soon reached the farmhouse, which was

almost sublime in its dreariness. There was not a tree within sight; there was not, at this season, a green pasture--nothing but fallow and turnips everywhere, in large fields divided by hedges plashed to unrelieved levels. Plashed means hedges that are cut and laid, that is, the stems are cut half off and pegged down on the bank where they sprout upward.

Tess waited outside the door of the farmhouse till the group of workfolk had received their wages, and then Marian introduced her. The farmer himself, it appeared, was not at home, but his wife, who represented him this evening, made no objection to hiring Tess, on her agreeing to remain till Old Lady-Day. Female field-labour was seldom offered now, and its cheapness made it profitable for tasks which women could perform as readily as men.

Having signed the agreement, there was nothing more for Tess to do at present than to get a lodging, and she found one in the house at whose gable-wall she had warmed herself. It was a poor subsistence that she had ensured, but it would afford a shelter for the winter at any rate.

The swede-field in which she and her companion were set hacking was a stretch of a hundred odd acres in one patch, on the highest ground of the farm, rising above stony lanchets or lynchets-- (*lynchet= a slope or terrace along a chalk down*)
...The upper half of each turnip had been eaten off by the live-stock, and it was the business of the two women to grub up the lower or earthy half of the root with a hooked fork called a hacker, that it might be eaten also.

Nobody came near them, and their movements showed a mechanical regularity; their forms standing enshrouded in Hessian "wroppers"--sleeved brown pinafores, tied behind to the bottom, to keep their gowns from blowing about--scant skirts revealing boots that reached high up the ankles, and yellow sheepskin gloves with gauntlets.

They worked on hour after hour, unconscious of the forlorn aspect they bore in the landscape, not thinking of the justice or injustice of their lot. ..In the afternoon the rain came on again, and Marian said that they need not work any more. But if they did not work they would not be paid; so they worked on. It was so high a situation, this field, that the rain had no occasion to fall, but raced along horizontally upon the yelling wind, sticking into them like glass splinters till they were wet through. Tess had not known till now what was really meant by that. There are degrees of dampness, and a very little is called being wet through in common talk. But to stand working slowly in a field, and feel the creep of rain-water, first in legs and shoulders, then on hips and head, then at back, front, and sides, and yet to work on till the leaden light diminishes and marks that the sun is down, demands a distinct modicum

of stoicism, even of valour.

Yet they did not feel the wetness so much as might be supposed. They were both young, and they were talking of the time when they lived and loved together at Talbothays Dairy. (the dairy where they had worked in summer time)

Marian's will had a method of assisting itself by taking from her pocket as the afternoon wore on a pint bottle corked with white rag, from which she invited Tess to drink. Tess's unassisted power of dreaming, however, being enough for her sublimation at present, she declined except the merest sip, and then Marian took a pull from the spirits.

"I've got used to it," she said, "and can't leave it off now. 'Tis my only comfort."

Amid this scene Tess slaved in the morning frosts and in the afternoon rains. When it was not swede-grubbing it was swede-trimming, in which process they sliced off the earth and the fibres with a bill-hook before storing the roots for future use. At this occupation they could shelter themselves by a thatched hurdle if it rained; but if it was frosty even their thick leather gloves could not prevent the frozen masses they handled from biting their fingers.

.....They reached the wheat-barn and entered it. One end of the long structure was full of corn; the middle was where the reed-drawing was carried on, and there had already been placed in the reed-press the evening before as many sheaves of wheat as would be sufficient for the women to draw from during the day.

In addition to Tess, Marian, and Izz, there were two women from a neighbouring village... They did all kinds of men's work by preference, including well-sinking, hedging, ditching, and excavating, without any sense of fatigue. Noted reed-drawers were they too, and looked round upon the other three with some superciliousness.

Putting on their gloves, all set to work in a row in front of the press, an erection formed of two posts connected by a cross-beam, under which the sheaves to be drawn from were laid ears outward, the beam being pegged down by pins in the uprights, and lowered as the sheaves diminished.

The day hardened in colour, the light coming in at the barndoors upwards from the snow instead of downwards from the sky. The girls pulled handful after handful from the press.

End of Chapter 16 and extracts Chapter 17 from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* describing the dairy farm where Tess works, the stool on which the milkmaid sits, and the singing.

Suddenly there arose from all parts of the lowland a prolonged and repeated call--"Waow! waow! waow!"

From the furthest east to the furthest west the cries spread as if by contagion, accompanied in some cases by the barking of a dog. It was ...the ordinary announcement of milking-time--half-past four o'clock, when the dairymen set about getting in the cows.

The red and white herd nearest at hand, which had been phlegmatically waiting for the call, now trooped towards the *steading=farm* background, their great bags of milk swinging under them as they walked. Tess followed slowly in their rear, and entered the *barton=farmyard* by the open gate through which they had entered before her. Long thatched sheds stretched round the enclosure, their slopes encrusted with vivid green moss, and their eaves supported by wooden posts rubbed to a glossy smoothness by the flanks of infinite cows and calves of bygone years ...

They were the less restful cows that were stalled. Those that would stand still of their own will were milked in the middle of the yard, where many of such better behaved ones stood waiting now--all prime milchers, such as were seldom seen out of this valley, and not always within it; nourished by the succulent feed which the water-meads supplied at this prime season of the year. Those of them that were spotted with white reflected the sunshine in dazzling brilliancy, and the polished brass knobs of their horns glittered with something of military display. Their large-veined udders hung ponderous as sandbags, the teats sticking out like the legs of a gipsy's crock; and as each animal lingered for her turn to arrive the milk oozed forth and fell in drops to the ground.

Chapter 17

The dairymaids and men had flocked down from their cottages and out of the dairy-house with the arrival of the cows from the meads; the maids walking in pattens,* not on account of the weather, but to keep their shoes above the mulch of the *barton*. Each girl sat down on her three-legged stool, her face sideways, her right cheek resting against the cow, and looked musingly along the animal's flank at Tess as she approached. The male milkers, with hat-brims turned down, resting flat on their foreheads and gazing on the ground, did not

observe her. *pattens are overshoes with wooden soles that keep indoor shoes above wet muddy ground.

One of these was a sturdy middle-aged man--whose long white "pinner"* was somewhat finer and cleaner than the wraps of the others, and whose jacket underneath had a presentable marketing aspect--the master-dairyman, of whom she was in quest, his double character as a working milker and butter maker here during six days, and on the seventh as a man in shining broad-cloth in his family pew at church, being so marked as to have inspired a rhyme:

Dairyman Dick
All the week:--
On Sundays Mister Richard Crick.

Seeing Tess standing at gaze he went across to her.

- a pinner is an apron with a bib, or a pinafore, to protect clothing

The majority of dairymen have a cross manner at milking time, but it happened that Mr Crick was glad to get a new hand--for the days were busy ones now--and he received her warmly...

Then the talk was of business only.

"You can milk 'em clean, my maiddy? I don't want my cows going azew at this time o' year."

She reassured him on that point, and he surveyed her up and down. She had been staying indoors a good deal, and her complexion had grown delicate.

"Quite sure you can stand it? 'Tis comfortable enough here for rough folk."

She declared that she could stand it, and her zest and willingness seemed to win him over.

"I'll begin milking now, to get my hand in," said Tess.

When Tess had changed her bonnet for a hood, and was really on her stool under the cow, and the milk was squirting from her fists into the pail, she appeared to feel that she really had laid a new foundation for her future. The conviction bred serenity, her pulse slowed, and she was able to look about her.

The milkers formed quite a little battalion of men and maids, the men operating on the hard-teated animals, the maids on the kindlier natures. It was a large dairy. There were nearly a hundred milchers under Crick's management, all told; and of the herd the

master-dairyman milked six or eight with his own hands, unless away from home. These were the cows that milked hardest of all; for his journey-milkmen being more or less casually hired, he would not entrust this half-dozen to their treatment, lest, from indifference, they should not milk them fully; nor to the maids, lest they should fail in the same way for lack of finger-grip; with the result that in course of time the cows would "go azew"--that is, dry up. It was not the loss for the moment that made slack milking so serious, but that with the decline of demand there came decline, and ultimately cessation, of supply.

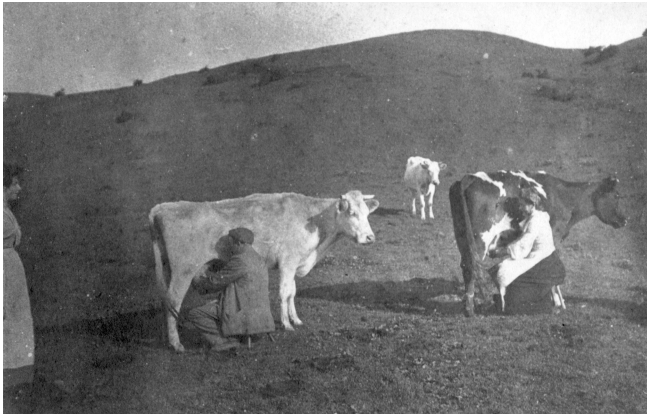
After Tess had settled down to her cow there was for a time no talk in the barton, and not a sound interfered with the purr of the milk-jets into the numerous pails, except a momentary exclamation to one or other of the beasts requesting her to turn round or stand still. The only movements were those of the milkers' hands up and down, and the swing of the cows' tails. ...

"To my thinking," said the dairyman, rising suddenly from a cow he had just finished off, snatching up his three-legged stool in one hand and the pail in the other, and moving on to the next hard-yielder in his vicinity, "to my thinking, the cows don't gie down their milk to-day as usual. Upon my life, if Winker do begin keeping back like this, she'll not be worth going under by midsummer."

"'Tis because there's a new hand come among us," said Jonathan Kail. "I've noticed such things afore."

"To be sure. It may be so. I didn't think o't."

Songs were often resorted to in dairies hereabout as an enticement to the cows when they showed signs of withholding their usual yield; and the band of milkers at this request burst into melody--in purely business-like tones, it is true, and with no great spontaneity; the result, according to their own belief, being a decided improvement during the song's continuance. ..They had gone through fourteen or fifteen verses of a cheerful ballad about a murderer who was afraid to go to bed in the dark because he saw certain brimstone flames around him.



This is a photograph taken in the very early 1900s of cows being milked by hand in North Yorkshire.

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, ‘bleared and black and blind’.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, ‘abode’, ‘sloped’.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, ‘bode’, ‘boughed’.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like ‘plash’.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, ‘still couches she’.
The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, ‘say’, ‘decay’. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in ‘say’ and ‘decay’. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in ‘growing’, ‘showing’.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines