Alison Oram
Institute of Historical Research
School of Advanced Study
University of London
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3660-0023

Er(r)go. Teoria–Literatura–Kultura
Er(r)go. Theory–Literature–Culture
Nr / No. 49 (2/2024)
queerowa ruralność
queer rurality
ISSN 2544-3186
https://doi.org/10.31261/errgo.16474

Primroses, Preservation and Neo-paganism: Queer Connections to the English Countryside

Abstract: This article examines some elements of queer rural life in England between the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. It discusses a selection of queer people who had a profound relationship to the English countryside and considers how they established their personal lives in rural contexts and how far their significant interactions with rural England might be said to be queer. Taken together, their lives and work illustrate three themes that will encourage further debate among historians of the queer rural: the creation of queer home in the countryside; a desire for the preservation of nature, the landscape and rural life; and an 'alternative' spiritual connection to nature and the rural.

Keywords: queer, rural, preservation, spirituality, queer domesticity, queer households, England

The composer Elizabeth Lutyens wrote of her visits during the 1920s to New Bells Farm, owned by her cousin, Eve Balfour:

> I loved the life there, free and unconventional and dominated by the warm strength of Eve's personality. She had an Egyptian face of great strength and charm, with cropped hair and masculine manners, in spite of a feminine heart. She would stride about the farm pipe in mouth and in trousers. […] Farm girls and other friends lived around in pretty cottages, all gathering in the big main dining room for meals.[1]

Lutyens was so enchanted that she built her own cabin on the farm, as a bolthole from London. This is all apparently very rural and rather queer. But does the queerness reside in Balfour's appearance and sense of self, or in her activities in the countryside? And how 'rural' is this place, if for Lutyens it is a feasible weekend

1. Quoted in Rose Collis, "Eve Balfour: 'The Compost Queen,'" in Rose Collis, *Portraits to the Wall: Historic Lesbian Lives Unveiled* (London: Cassell, 1994), 144.

retreat from London? This article sets out to examine what the queer rural might encompass in English queer history between the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, and where we might take it in what is, so far, a surprisingly sparse field.

Historians have been much slower off the starting blocks than their counterparts in geography in examining queer rural England. The main theme thus far has been how the countryside has served as a place of escape and of radical possibility for (implicitly urban) queer people.[2] Edward Carpenter's experiment in collective living is usually cited as the foundational example. Carpenter, the godfather of lesbian and gay rights in Britain, built his home at Millthorpe in Derbyshire in 1883 to live in harmony with nature, growing food in a market garden. He shared it initially with his friends, the working-class Fearneyhough family, and from the 1890s lived there openly with his partner George Merrill, at a time when male homosexual acts were illegal. Their home became a refuge and place of pilgrimage for other radicals and queer friends.[3] The natural world of the countryside seemed to offer space for gay men to reclaim their sexuality away from the danger-filled surveillance of "unnatural" practices in the city. For example, Parson's Pleasure, the long-standing and queerly all-male swimming spot, set in a secluded area on the liminal edge of Oxford, suggests this movement from urban to rural. However class, race and ethnicity are also in play in queer people's relationship to place, and another recent essay points to the ambivalent and confronting relationship that Black people have had to the English countryside over the twentieth century.[4] In the late twentieth century, groups of lesbians created rural ways of living with nature and away from patriarchy. Women's Land was established in Wales, and the migration of lesbians from London and Manchester to the West Yorkshire towns of Todmorden and Hebden Bridge from the 1970s and 1980s to build a radical and semi-rural community is well documented.[5]

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2. For a discussion of place in UK queer histories, see Matt Cook and Alison Oram, "Introduction," in *Locating Queer Histories: Places and Traces across the UK*, ed. Justin Bengry, Matt Cook, and Alison Oram (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). For a summary of rural queer histories, see Matt Cook, "Queer Cities, Suburbs and Countryside," in *The Oxford Handbook of LGBTQ History*, ed. Dominic Janes and Howard Chiang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2025).

3. Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London: Verso, 2008).

4. George Townsend, "A Queer History of Parson's Pleasure, Oxford" and Caroline Bressey and Gemma Romain, "Tracing Queer Black Spaces in Interwar Britain," both in *Locating Queer Histories*.

5. Lesbian migration to West Yorkshire has been discussed by geographers; e.g.: Darren P. Smith and Louise Holt, "Lesbian Migrants in the Gentrified Valley and 'Other' Geographies of Rural Gentrification," *Journal of Rural Studies* 21 (2005), 313–322. Most recently the history and politics of the area has been examined by Victoria Golding, "We Weren't Asking Permission to Be Lesbians Here": Sexuality, Space and Community in the Upper Calder Valley 1981–1999, PhD thesis, University of Sussex (2022). As yet there is no published work on Women's Lands in the UK.

This article deals with a period – roughly from the 1870s to the 1970s – before the rise of self-conscious lesbian and gay movements which promoted an ethos of "back to nature." I will show that there was considerable leeway, at least for middle- and upper-class queer people, to be deeply involved in country life, and to be accepted as part of "normal" rural communities rather than standing out as particularly strange.[6] Their creative enterprises and ideas prefigured many late modern LGBTQ political and cultural concerns.

The Particularities of the English

The definitions and experiences of the "rural" in England – geographically, socially and culturally – are somewhat indeterminate and malleable; queer, even. England and Wales ceased to have a majority rural population by 1851, and by 1900 around 80% of people lived in towns or cities.[7] The countryside in England is mostly densely cultivated: agricultural areas such as East Anglia, the Yorkshire Dales, or the market gardens of Kent, were very closely tied economically to nearby market towns, to regional cities and to the capital. City dwellers of all classes have used the English countryside as a resource for relaxation and pleasure: the aristocracy, whose wealth historically derived from their lands, but who spent "the season" in London; the middle classes who might own or aspire to a place in the countryside; and working-class people taking day trips to walk on the downs near London or the hills outside Manchester or Leeds. Queer folk contributed to this constant traffic between urban and rural, to live, stay, work or make other use of the countryside.

Socially, rural life was closely ordered by class status (as it was in the rest of the nation). Class affected people's interactions in everyday life, how their households were perceived and how their activities were judged. For much of the twentieth century, class position could be more pertinent than sexuality or gender, income or occupation in influencing the shape of queer people's lives in the countryside. English eccentricity and artistic bohemianism might also come into play, enabling or obscuring queer lives. Unusual or odd behaviour, such as same-sex partnerships or cross-gendered appearance, could be positively tolerated as simply unconventional or curious, even producing cultural stereotypes, such as the two tweedy ladies running a village teashop. Class status, artistic licence and the ideal of the country retreat worked together in facilitating artists' colonies across rural

6. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015), 1–25.

7. The proportion depends on the definition of urban and rural used.

England, the Bloomsbury Group's Sussex farmhouse, Charleston, being the best known queer example.

In England, the "rural," the "countryside" and "nature" are not just places and landscapes outside cities, but are freighted with significant cultural meanings. The long pastoral tradition in English literature is well documented, and the search for truth or spiritual uplift in nature enjoyed a revival in the late nineteenth century. After decades of industrial development, the countryside was seen as the repository of the pure and unpolluted, of goodness, even of national identity. This conception of the rural as an antidote to urban problems, squalor and busyness was highly romanticised by artists, writers and social reformers. Our historic queer forerunners were certainly not immune from this vision of the countryside, as the bucolic tone of my opening quote illustrates.[8]

In the remainder of this article I discuss a selection of middle- and upper-class queer women who had a profound relationship to the English countryside, both as a refuge and as a vocation. I consider how they established their personal lives in rural contexts and how far their significant interactions with rural England might be said to be queer. I shall discuss in turn Victorian social reformer Octavia Hill, the twentieth century author Sylvia Townsend Warner, organic farmer Lady Eve Balfour and finally Marie Hartley and her good companions, who together wrote dozens of books on the customs of agricultural Yorkshire. These queer people had widely differing perspectives on the countryside, the landscape, agriculture and everyday rural life. Their lives and work coalesce around three themes: the creation of queer home in the countryside; a desire for the preservation of nature, the landscape and rural life; and an 'alternative' spiritual connection to the natural environment.

Creating Queer Family in the Countryside

Various threads connect the queer rural households I go on to discuss. First, the couples and groups sit on a spectrum of anti-urbanism, from a pronounced antipathy to the city to a marked preference for the countryside. Octavia Hill moved between London and her rural home; the others had their permanent homes in the countryside. A second thread is the rural acceptance of same-sex couples, whether as a consequence of class privilege, their position as 'bohemian' writers or artists, or their commitment to agricultural rural England. Thirdly,

8. See Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England, from 1880 to 1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1982). Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973). For the queer pastoral, see David Bell and Gill Valentine, "Queer Country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives," *Journal of Rural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1995), 113–115.

the rural context (cheaper and larger properties, for example) might enable the intentional setting up of queer family-households of couples and friends.

Co-founder of the National Trust in 1895 and advocate for open spaces, Victorian social reformer Octavia Hill had her main home with her mother and sisters in London where she spent her working life. She was finally able to live part-time in the countryside when her life partner Harriot Yorke built a house at Crockham, in Kent in 1884. By this time Hill (1838–1912) was a public figure, well-known for developing new systems of housing management in urban slums. Hill's story not only takes us to the "back to the land" movement of late nineteenth-century Britain but also connects us to particular forms of Victorian queerness.

Hill's personal life was women-centred. In her early 20s, Hill had had an intense attachment to Sophia Jex-Blake (a pioneer woman doctor), and they combined their households to live together for a short period of time, a domestic arrangement that finished unhappily.[9] When she was almost forty, Hill was very briefly engaged to be married, then soon after, in 1877, she experienced a nervous breakdown from overwork. In the words of an early biographer:

> Miss Yorke, who now came forward to give her sympathy and help, became one of the most important figures in the remaining years of Octavia's life; and by her persistent devotion to her comfort and active help in her work, did much to encourage her to new efforts.[10]

Yorke (1842–1930) accompanied Hill on three years of long trips to Italy and Greece to recover her health, from which Hill wrote appreciatively to her mother: "I rest much more on Miss Yorke's quiet, strong, wise help. There is something so sterling in her," and to her sister that she "makes every place at once like home."[11] The two women lived together for the following thirty-five years, until Hill's death, forming a female marriage, a partnership which, as Martha Vicinus and Sharon Marcus have both argued, was socially recognised in Victorian society.[12]

Yorke's house, "Larksfield" in Crockham was a haven for Hill, a place to relax after her demanding work in London. Larksfield became the centre from which the two women explored the Kent countryside, and worked to protect it alongside their national-level campaigning, buying up parcels of land to preserve the

9. E. Moberly Bell, *Octavia Hill: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1942), 52–63.

10. *Life of Octavia Hill: As Told in her Letters*, ed. C. Edmund Maurice (London: Macmillan, 1913), 355.

11. To her mother, 4 Feb. 1878, in *Life of Octavia Hill*, 357. To Miranda, 5 Aug. 1878, in *Life of Octavia Hill*, 368–369.

12. Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004). Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), chaps. 1 and 5.

views over the Weald.[13] Hill loved this spot: "[flowers] are set in great spaces of the loveliest tall grass and sorrel, every colour from emerald green thro' gold and silver and grey and orange, to deep crimson and russet brown, graduating into one another, and glowing as the wind bends the tufts of grass […]."[14] Hill's family household in London included her mother, sisters, Yorke and two further women friends; "fellow workers." When they were financially obliged to downsize in 1890, Hill's sister Miranda wrote: "It would be a great sorrow to part with them; so we are thankful to get a house large enough for us all."[15] Women-focussed queer domesticity was clearly possible in the city, and Hill's work held her to London for much of the time. But Hill and Yorke are buried in Crockham churchyard, together with Miranda Hill, next to a gravestone that preserves the significance of Hill's love relationships with women, her intimate friend and her sister.

Sylvia Townsend Warner, one of Britain's most brilliant twentieth-century writers, more decisively turned her back on the city. As a young woman, Warner (1893–1978) was able to enjoy an independent (though impoverished) life in London, working as a musicologist while starting to write novels, poetry and short stories. From the intellectual upper middle-class, she was well-connected in London arts circles, and at home at literary parties.[16] In 1922 Warner visited the Essex coastal marshes, a landscape that enraptured her. She became, at the age of 28, "properly her own person, having been until then 'the creature of whoever I was with.'"[17] She also spent time in the Dorset village of Chaldon Herring, as did growing numbers of other writers and their friends, gradually turning the village into an artists' colony.[18] Rural life inspired *Lolly Willowes* (1926), Warner's first published novel which was a great success. Its eponymous heroine, a put-upon middle-class spinster, escapes the city to find freedom in village life and its occult sub-culture.

Warner's strong connection to the rural was cemented by her love affair with poet Valentine Ackland (1906–1969). Tall and attractive, Ackland had had affairs with women and men, was briefly married, and enjoyed wearing masculine clothing. In 1930, while staying in the Chaldon cottage Warner had rented, they began a passionate and lifelong partnership. Warner was by then tired of the London parties and networks she had engaged in at the crest of her fame, and Ackland had never been enamoured of the city.[19] The couple were drawn to rural places

13. Matthew Kelly, *The Women who Saved the English Countryside* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 11–77.

14. Letter to her mother, 23 June, 1889, in *Life of Octavia Hill*, 495.

15. Miranda to Mrs Durrant, 12 Nov. 1890, in *Life of Octavia Hill*, 515.

16. Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Minerva, 1991).

17. Harman, *Townsend Warner*, 53 and 51–53.

18. Harman, *Townsend Warner*, 47–50.

19. Harman, *Townsend Warner*.

because they loved them; Dorset was not a hideaway. They did not disguise or dissemble their same-sex love affair. "In Chaldon, Sylvia and Valentine behaved so shamelessly that the village became rather prim and unnoticing […]."[20] Their cleaner found them in bed together and "cried out cheerfully, 'Twins!'"; when the oil man saw them kissing he "averted his gaze."[21] The villagers had become used to the strange ways of their new residents and their urban visitors. In 1937, the couple found a more comfortable house on the edge of Maiden Newton, a few miles away, where they lived for the rest of their lives. Their new home was on the river. "This place is most beautiful […]. The river is an incessant pleasure, and is always handing us small nosegays of beauty or entertainment. The latest nosegay is a posy of three young water-rats who have just learned to swim […]."[22]

Even more viscerally enmeshed in the land and countryside, Lady Eve Balfour (1898–1990) was a pioneer of the organic farming movement, founder in 1946 of the Soil Association, and head of an expansive queer farming household. The fourth daughter of an aristocratic Scottish family, Balfour loved the outdoor life and decided as a child to become a farmer. Though Conservative in politics (one uncle was A. J. Balfour, Conservative Prime Minister 1902–1905), the Balfour family was progressive on women's suffrage and education and sent her to University College Reading in 1915 to study agriculture. Many years later she told an interviewer: "I've never lived for more than three weeks of my life consecutively in a town, and that was three weeks too much!"[23] In 1919 with her sister Mary, Balfour bought New Bells Farm, at Haughley, near Stowmarket in Suffolk which, with other friends plus paying farm students coming to live there, became a form of alternative community. One longer-term resident, Beryl Hearden, nicknamed Beb, was Balfour's business (and possibly romantic) partner for several years and life-long friend. Historian Erin Gill writes:

> In addition to the sisters' retired nanny, farmworkers and their families – some of whom lived in tied cottages – New Bells was also home to a gaggle of young women and men who participated in farm work and who, collectively, created a lively, slightly bohemian and modern atmosphere. An example was the practice of sharing clothes.[24]

20. Harman, *Townsend Warner*, 109–110.
21. Harman, *Townsend Warner*, 110.
22. Harman, *Townsend Warner*, 167.
23. Archive clip played on BBC Radio 4, "Woman's Hour," 5 January 2015.
24. Erin Gill, "Lady Eve Balfour and the British Organic Food and Farming Movement," PhD thesis, Aberystwyth University (2010), 42. For Balfour's life also see John Martin, "Balfour, Lady Evelyn Barbara [Eve] (1898–1990)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published online, 3 January 2008.

Leaving their clothes in a heap on the floor, the early risers picked out whatever they fancied. Balfour and Beb habitually wore trousers or breeches. It was not particularly unusual for a woman to become a working farmer in the early twentieth century. Agriculture was becoming a popular new profession for middle- and upper-class women, especially after the First World War, though most chose horticulture or poultry farming. The active outdoor life was attractive to many young women, especially those queerly rejecting urban conventions of femininity.[25]

Despite hating the city, Balfour was not a complete refusnik of modern life, and her activities as a young woman echo various lesbian themes of the interwar years. Balfour and her sister, Beb and other friends held amateur theatricals at New Bells and formed a jazz band, earning money by playing at local pubs. Like other upper-class boyish women, Balfour gained a pilot's licence, enjoyed sailing, and on the occasions when she and Beb made some money, spent it on motorbikes and fast cars. Around 1926, skilled dairywoman Kathleen Carnley came to live at New Bells and became Balfour's life partner.[26]

The New Bells women were interested in unorthodox lifestyles – in vegetarianism, in the benefits of sleeping outdoors, and in dress reform (which favoured woollen clothing over cotton). Their interwar household constituted a queer extended family, but it also has affinities with traditional farm households, which would include family members, domestic servants, and often provide meals for the farm workers. The youthful, mostly female group at New Bells had friendly relations with their rural neighbours. Nicola Verdon found that women frequently farmed in same-sex partnerships in interwar England and that this aroused little comment or hostility.[27]

Marie Hartley (1905–2006) and her successive companions were always in love with their native countryside, rural Yorkshire, in the north of England. They return us in some respects to Octavia Hill. Like her they cannot easily be described as "lesbian," although "queer" gives us greater leeway to describe their domestic relationships.[28] Marie Hartley, and her partners Ella Pontefract (1896–1945) and then Joan Ingleby (1911–2000), created a formidable writing and illustration enterprise, celebrating their county, its people and its rapidly disappearing customs, agricultural practices and industries in around thirty books between the 1930s and the 1990s.

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25. Nicola Verdon, "Business and Pleasure: Middle-Class Women's Work and the Professionalization of Farming in England, 1890–1939," *Journal of British Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012), 393–415. Joan K. F. Heggie and Sarah Carter, "Miss Jack May, Lady Farmer in England and Canada," *Women's History Review* 32, no. 3 (2023), 358–388.

26. Gill, "Eve Balfour," 39–45. Also see Collis, "Eve Balfour." This essay by Collis is the first and possibly only discussion of Balfour as a lesbian.

27. Verdon, "Business and Pleasure," 412–413.

28. I am grateful to Jenny Collieson who drew my attention to these women.

Pontefract and Hartley both came from families made prosperous in the Yorkshire woollen industry and met in 1924. Hartley had trained at Leeds College of Art and won a scholarship to the Slade in London, where she and Pontefract spent a year in 1931–1932, sharing a room in Bloomsbury. The two women were not able to live together again for another decade, but from the mid-1920s they travelled around the Yorkshire countryside in their caravan, talking to local people about their work and everyday lives, photographing and drawing everything, to produce a series of books.[29] In 1938 the couple bought a dilapidated cottage high on the hills in Wensleydale, had it renovated by local craftsmen and moved in together in 1941.[30] Although careful to describe her as her book collaborator, it is clear from her memoir of Pontefract, who died young, that Hartley loved her deeply. Two months after Pontefract's death in February 1945, Hartley returned to their cottage.

> The plum tree which we had planted there four years before had never flowered, but now it was covered with sprays of white blossom. The sight was so beautiful and unexpected that I turned to call to Ella "Come and look," only to be brought up suddenly by the realization that she was not there, and that never again would we share the results of our hard work, its successes and its mistakes.[31]

Their friend Joan Ingilby supported Hartley following Pontefract's death and moved into the cottage in 1947, becoming Hartley's second life partner for over fifty years. Together they produced 22 further books.

This article is the first to celebrate the work of the three women as partners and claim them for the historic queer family. They illustrate some of the complexities of English rural life, in which same-sex couples could live together without drawing disapprobation.[32] Although they were artists and writers, Hartley and her companions were certainly not bohemian, and to their neighbours and readers they were clearly proud Yorkshire women, highly respectable and publicly honoured.[33] The women dressed conventionally, in the skirt suits and permed hair typical of their era. Hartley, Pontefract and Ingilby, unlike Hill, were living

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29. Six in all, starting with: Ella Pontefract, *Swaledale* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1934).

30. Ella Pontefract and Marie Hartley, *Yorkshire Cottage* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1942).

31. Marie Hartley, *Yorkshire Heritage: A Memoir to Ella Pontefract* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1950), 4.

32. Although I can only discuss four examples here, there was a wider queer presence in the English countryside than is often assumed including, for example, the three women, Edy Craig, "Tony" Atwood and "Chris" St John, who lived at Smallhythe in Kent and their local networks.

33. Hartley and Ingilby were awarded MBEs in 1997. Martin Wainwright, "Marie Hartley" (Obituary), *The Guardian*, 17 May 2006. John Howard similarly found that queer men in the

in a period when the concept of lesbianism or female homosexuality was widely understood, often in a derogatory way.[34] Hence, although Hartley and Ingilby (and earlier Pontefract) did everything together, and as their fame spread were happy to be photographed and referred to as a partnership, the outward emphasis was on their working or writing relationship.[35]

The English countryside offered different kinds of freedom to these couples. For some it was as a retreat from the pressures of urban life and work, and possibly from the expectations placed on single middle-class women. For Hill and Hartley, rural living afforded greater privacy for their intimate friendships. But for all of them, the pull of the rural and its natural pleasures was important. Villagers might gossip about them, but same-sex pairs were not necessarily seen as peculiar, even in small communities. All the women I discuss lived openly together. They were often protected by their class position – odd people from the city became "gentry" in the rural hierarchy – and sometimes by their bohemian status as artists or writers, despite gender-nonconforming styles of dress.[36] Larger group households including family members, partners and friends could more easily be accommodated in the countryside, but equally existed in the city, as Hill's capacious Victorian "family of choice" in London demonstrates. Hill's and later Balfour's households displace Edward Carpenter from being the only historic model for lesbian and gay collective living. The challenge of "seeing" same-sex couples for the queer people they were could also be diluted if they lived in larger households of disparate people, of which there were many other rural examples.[37]

The Preservation and Conservation of Rural England

Some of these women shared a drive for the conservation of rural England. They aimed to save nature, to protect the landscape, preserve knowledge of rural traditions and to nurture the fertile soil itself. In their diverse engagements with the countryside they wanted to leave legacies that would benefit their fellow citizens; their impulse to preserve was powerfully connected with feelings of national service and belonging. Hill emphasised that the working-class urban

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southern USA were tolerated if they fell in line with social expectations of masculinity. John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

34. Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-war Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

35. Marie Hartley and Joan Ingilby, *Fifty Years in the Yorkshire Dales* (Otley: Smith Settle, 1995).

36. Further examples include the artist couple Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts, who had a home in Kent.

37. For example, the couple Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines at Benton End, Suffolk, who ran an art school there.

families who were tenants of her housing schemes had as much right to open, green spaces and beauty as more affluent city dwellers. In her early campaigns to preserve woodland and fields in London, she helped to save Hampstead Heath from development. She urged middle-class people: "to give £25 or £50 to save a bit of green hilly ground near a city, where fresh winds may blow, and where wild flowers still are found, and where happy people can still walk within reach of their homes […]."[38] In her work as a leader in the "open spaces" movement, which ratcheted up from the 1870s, Hill began to challenge and enter the masculine worlds of public policy and legal work. She was not always successful in saving the green spaces of commons and remaining urban fields, but her considerable influence in late Victorian society contributed significantly to the growth in support for the preservationist cause.

By the 1890s, following concern with how railways and mining were threatening the cherished landscapes of the Lake District, Hill and her friends (notably Robert Hunter) brought together the efforts of existing preservation societies to create the National Trust (today the charity with the largest membership in Britain). Like other independent women of her time, Hill worked towards the public good and social progress. As a single woman, but with the support of her partner Harriot Yorke, she was able to pursue her campaigns in a way that would have been more difficult for a married woman constrained by duties to husband and children.

Balfour similarly initiated and led a new movement – the practical testing out and advocacy of organic farming. For most of the interwar period, Balfour farmed at New Bells Farm in Haughley using conventional methods, but by 1938 she became convinced by the arguments for "biodynamic farming," that is, using organic manures rather than chemical fertilizers. With the help of a neighbour and benefactor, Alice Debenham, she acquired the next door farm and started a practical trial, growing food in one area of land using organic manure and in another area using artificial fertilizers. This became known as the Haughley Experiment. Weekly soil samples were scientifically analysed and showed that the chemical nutrients in the earth varied over the year and were richer in the organic section.[39] While women have historically made a significant contribution to agriculture in England, this was usually as farmers' wives, widows and seasonal farm workers.[40] Balfour's bold move towards organicism with her partner Kathleen Carnley and supporter Alice Debenham was a radical turn in farming practice, instigated and financed by a group of self-assured women outside of heterosexual structures.

38. To Mrs Senior, 3 Aug. 1875, in *Life of Octavia Hill*, 333.
39. Gill, "Eve Balfour."
40. Verdon, "Business and Pleasure."

In 1943 Balfour published *The Living Soil*, a successful book that argued for the benefits of organic farming for nutrition, preventative medicine and sustainable agriculture. "If a nation's health depends on the way its food is grown," she wrote, "then agriculture must be looked upon as one of the health services, in fact the primary health service."[41] Balfour co-founded and became first president of the Soil Association in 1946, which aimed to promote organic agriculture.[42] Despite her considerable efforts, Balfour's message had little purchase on postwar government policy, which encouraged mechanised industrial farming for cheaper food. During the 1950s, as the Soil Association became better known, she made extensive international lecture tours to promote organic farming, to America more than once and to Australia, accompanied by Carnley, her partner of fifty years. By the 1980s, as environmental issues moved up the political agenda, her ideas were taken more seriously. Balfour was a conservationist – she wanted to protect the fertility of the soil through valuing older modes of agricultural practice, because she believed they had more fruitful and beneficial outcomes. Yet as a radical advocate of organic farming she hoped to disrupt orthodox beliefs and looked to the future.

Marie Hartley and her partners also aimed to preserve knowledge of regional countryside traditions and practices. In a period of great popular interest in the landscape and buildings of Britain, their books ran into several editions. These women were not writing sketchy travelogues, however, but meticulous, well researched ethnographies of Yorkshire life. Hartley and Ingilby's *The Old Hand Knitters of the Dales* (1951) together with *Life and Tradition in the Yorkshire Dales* (1968) are usually cited as their outstanding contributions to knowledge of the history of daily life in the county. Ingilby wrote in engaging detail about the crafts, skills and topography of Yorkshire, illustrated by Hartley's line drawings and photographs. They paid attention to women's work such as butter-making, to the layout of farmhouses and cottages, to local skills such as tailoring, to sports and games, and to phrases and terminology used across the county, differing from one dale to the next. Their work was true cultural history, documenting what was rapidly disappearing, for both a popular and scholarly readership.[43] Hartley and her partners also began collecting and rescuing artefacts in their travels across Yorkshire. As well as being ethnographers, artists, forerunners of oral history and etymologists, the three women were also archivists, amassing "a nationally

41. Quoted in Sarah Langford, "Lady Eve Balfour: The Formidable Woman Who Pioneered Organic Farming in Britain," *Country Life*, September 15, 2021.

42. Gill, "Eve Balfour." Martin, "Balfour, Lady Evelyn."

43. Some of their books were well reviewed in scholarly journals – as early as 1954 in the *Economic History Review.*

significant collection," which became the basis of the Dales Countryside Museum in Hawes, Wensleydale from 1979.[44]

In their joint work over seven decades, Hartley, Pontefract and Ingilby were pioneers in agricultural and rural social history, and were significant in the broader postwar movement that began to value material heritage in folk museums. Accomplished historians, they did not romanticise these past ways of life, as perhaps Hill was inclined to idealise nature and the countryside. They understood the hardships of the life of the traditional Dales farmer. One obituary of Hartley notes: "Driven by pride in their county and love of its landscape, the three women were also unsentimental and accurate, demolishing many romantic myths about life in the pretty-looking villages."[45]

All these women were preservationists. Various scholars have observed the queer tendency to look backwards at the past. The collection of antique objects and the preservation and restoration of old buildings have long been associated with male homosexuality.[46] The queer women discussed here sustained their work in the forefront of new kinds of conservation over decades, and on a broad scale. Hill's contemporary, Edward Carpenter, wrote that the mixture of both masculine and feminine traits in Uranians (as he termed people who loved their own sex) meant that Uranian women were often leaders, willing to press boldly and forcefully for difficult causes. These women did not see themselves as outsiders (though their freedom from everyday heterosexual constraints aided their work). On the contrary, they each possessed a strong sense of national and regional belonging. Their efforts to leave a legacy to benefit their fellow citizens itself queers assumptions about how the nation's heritage and history is created and passed on.

"Muck and Magic": Spiritual Connections to the Natural World

The impulse to save elements of the countryside and value the natural world was linked for some of these women with a spiritual perspective. The expression of this varied widely across the spectrum of belief from mainstream Christianity

44. Martin Wainwright, "Hartley, Marie (1905–2006)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published online, 7 January 2010.

45. Wainwright, "Marie Hartley" (Obituary).

46. Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 160. Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), chaps. 1 and 2. Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

towards New Age religions and neo-paganism. By improving the lives of other people, their housing conditions and their access to the countryside, Hill felt she was doing God's work. This drive had begun in the Christian Socialist spiritual circles of her youth, and her keen sense of beauty was shaped by her early training, work and friendship with John Ruskin. Hill (and her fellow activists) had a vision of the countryside and nature as a spiritual and moral good.[47] More radically, Hill believed that poor people were as capable as the rich of appreciating and benefitting from the nurturing qualities of parks, commons and rural places.

Hill had a personal connection with nature that was linked to her intimate relationship with God. In her letters, Hill wrote frequently and lyrically about the spiritual importance of nature and the countryside. Missing her mother, she wrote to her in 1889: "I put some heartsease in my dress, a thing I hardly ever do; but there came into my mind that bit from the Pilgrim's Progress when the shepherd hands it to the pilgrims, and says it grows so well in the Valley of Humility, and comes fresh from the king's hand every day, and that it increases by sharing."[48] Hill often wrote of her trust in God and feelings of nearness to him. Brought up in a Unitarian home, Hill's perception of God within nature may owe its origins to that sect's transcendentalism. Describing the beauties of Larksfield she wrote: "one just steps out of this window and finds oneself on a sort of fraternal nearness with tall grass and stately and lovely flower."[49]

Sylvia Townsend Warner had no personal religious faith, but in her work elaborated a range of mysterious neo-pagan rural worlds. Even her teenage writing demonstrated a pantheistic quality.[50] Her seemingly light-hearted first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), explored the parallel supernatural structures that exist a hair's breath away from superficially ordered village life. After living as a helpful maiden aunt for many years in London, Lolly (or Laura as she reclaims her name) suddenly takes herself off to live in a decidedly odd country village. Here she gradually discovers that her neighbours are signed up to a pagan cult and realises she was always destined to join them. She becomes a witch, attends a Sabbath party and later meets Satan himself (in the form of a gamekeeper). *Lolly Willowes* has been discussed as a novel of women finding freedom and power (and as anticipating Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929)). With its intriguing elements of fantasy and magic, *Lolly Willowes* is a unique departure

47. Elizabeth Baigent, "Octavia Hill, Nature and Open Space: Crowning Success or Campaigning 'Utterly without Result,'" in *"Nobler Imaginings and Mightier Struggles": Octavia Hill, Social Activism and the Remaking of British society*, ed. Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2016).

48. To her mother, 17 June 1889, in *Life of Octavia Hill*, 494.

49. Letter from Octavia Hill to her mother, 23 June 1889, in *Life of Octavia Hill*, 495.

50. Harman, *Townsend Warner*, 18–19, 21.

from the interwar spinster novel. From the first, Laura relishes her natural surroundings and the changing weather, and learns to listen to the living meanings and messages conveyed by the trees and the wind, as she makes her liberating pact with Satan. "Hedge and coppice and solitary tree, and the broad dust-coloured faces of meadowsweet and hemlock had watched her go by, knowing. The dusk had closed her in, brooding over her."[51]

Warner had read Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) which argued that English folk customs derived from the 'old religions' stretching back to pre-Christian times.[52] Murray's work laid the ground for modern neo-paganism, and chimed with the contemporary interest in spiritualism and the occult (magnified by many families' desire to connect with their loved ones lost in the First World War). *Lolly Willowes* is not overtly a lesbian novel, yet at least one passage in the book has been cited as carrying lesbian desire.[53] At the witches Sabbath, attended by almost all the villagers, Laura finds herself dancing with red-haired Emily, who

> danced with a fervour that annihilated every misgiving. They whirled faster and faster, fused together like two suns that whirl and blaze in a single destruction. A strand of the red hair came undone and brushed across Laura's face. The contact made her tingle from head to foot. She shut her eyes and dived into obliviousness.[54]

It is the subject matter as a whole which makes *Lolly Willowes* queer: the queer conjunction of realism and fantasy, the queering of ordered English village life by underworlds of pagan celebration, and the queer, deep burrowing into the rural landscape of hedge, ditch, trees and weather.

At the end of her life, almost as a reprise, Warner returned to fantasy fiction, with an astonishing collection of short stories, *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977), which explores the manners and customs of the fairies. Wrapped into these stories is a witty reworking of European and British mythologies. Her heartless but pleasure-seeking and entertaining fairies live in rural societies, always presided over by a fairy Queen, that overlap with the human world, from which they pluck

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51. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes* (London: Virago, 2012 [1926]), 142.

52. Harman, *Townsend Warner*, 59–60.

53. Jane Garrity, *Step Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), chap 3. Garrity argues that Laura's whole relationship to nature and the countryside is homoerotic. Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap 11.

54. Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 159–160.

changelings, or mess with human activities.[55] Warner's conceptions of the supernatural, witchcraft and rural otherworlds reflect a general interest in magic and mystery that was gathering pace in English culture. Her "nature mysticism"[56] and her exploration of the pagan and the uncanny, as nearby worlds into which her characters easily slip, profoundly disrupt the settled class relations of the English village, and make possible alternative ways of experiencing the countryside.

Finally, to consider Balfour's spiritual relationship to the land. The title of her 1943 book, *The Living Soil*, points to Balfour's belief that even the smallest elements of the natural world are essential for the best working of the whole ecosystem, including human health. The Haughley Experiment showed that the fertile soil was indeed alive. Balfour's conversion to organic agricultural methods and her promotion of these approaches sprang from her religious practice, as well as from her scientific study. Her father was president of the Society of Psychical Research; he and other members of her family were Christian Spiritualists.[57] At New Bells Farm in the 1920s and 1930s, some of the household engaged in occult activities such as automatic writing and séances. Balfour wrote to her mother recounting how she and her sister Mary had felt the presence of recently deceased friends and their nanny.[58] Balfour's early farming partner at Nine Bells, Beb, once said that: "the world seemed to be divided into men, women and Theosophists."[59] This is an interesting throwaway comment. Theosophy was a spiritual practice derived from both Eastern and Western traditions, some branches of which emphasised the mutability of gender and celebrated same-sex love and gender crossing.[60] The remark suggests that Beb, Balfour and their circle were aware of a spiritual belief system which (in present-day terms) asserted non-binary identifications.

Balfour and some other members of the postwar Soil Association saw their work as a religion. This was not just in the strength of their convictions, but also reflected their belief in the spiritual properties of organic farming and the place of nature in their worldview. From the 1940s, Balfour's own convictions developed beyond Spiritualism towards what came to be known as New Age (or alternative) religions. She was quite eclectic and open-ended in her ideas, but at their core was the belief that beyond material existence there was a broader cosmic

55. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Kingdoms of Elfin* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2018).

56. Rebecca Beattie, *Pagan Portals: Nature Mystics: The Literary Gateway to Modern Paganism* (Alresford, Hants: Moon Books, 2015).

57. Gill, "Eve Balfour," 32. Martin, "Balfour, Lady Evelyn."

58. Gill, "Eve Balfour," 45–46, 61.

59. Quoted in Collis, "Eve Balfour," 144.

60. Alison Oram, "Feminism, Androgyny and Love between Women in *Urania* 1916–1940," *Media History* 7, no. 1 (2001), 57–70. Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

plan. Balfour and her sister were adherents of positive thinking, and discussed the role of the "higher powers" in aiding their campaign to reform agriculture.[61] Although in her leadership of the Soil Association Balfour asserted the scientifically-proven benefits of organic farming, she increasingly preferred a "vitalist" explanatory model, that is, that a natural "life force" regenerated the earth and could also aid human health and healing.[62] She wrote: "It is certain that life is governed by natural laws […] [The idea] that the behaviour of tangible, material plants and animals can all be explained in terms of tangible matter that can be weighed […] ignores the multitudinous life-energy and cosmic forces, because these, at present, are intangible."[63] The government and agricultural scientists expressed deep scepticism towards Balfour's ideas for most of her life. Misogyny was probably also bound up with this. She was seen as a crank, and the organic movement as resorting to "the supernatural" by mainstream scientists. Balfour's arguments were dismissed by the Ministry of Agriculture as "muck and mystery," or sometimes "muck and magic," although were beginning to be accepted by the time that she died, in 1990.[64]

Hill's spiritual connection with the countryside was fairly conventional, but for others it was more pantheistic and mystical. Balfour's ideas echo the pagan view of the earth itself as an organism (rather than simply a collection of chemicals), and humans as part of a diverse and mutually sustaining web of being. Nature-inspired mysticism has a long history in English literature and culture, and has increasingly been linked to a queer sensibility, for example in late-Victorian decadence and esotericism.[65] Discussion of alternative religions suggests that insofar as queer people are positioned as cultural outsiders, they become more attuned to alternative ways of feeling and connecting and are strongly represented in the New Age religions.[66] These case studies, particularly that of Eve Balfour, also show a desire to delve into alternatively-gendered forms of spirituality. The title of the Soil Association's newsletter was *Mother Nature*, but Nature – plants, trees, landscapes, animals, ecosystems – does not have a fixed gender, and so the

61. Gill, "Eve Balfour," chap. 4.

62. Gill, "Eve Balfour," 190–199.

63. Eve Balfour (1953–1954). Quoted in Gill, "Eve Balfour," 194.

64. Sarah Langford, *Rooted: Stories of Life, Land and a Farming Revolution* (London: Viking, 2022), 274. Gill, "Eve Balfour," 169, 216.

65. Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

66. Christine Hoff Kraemer, "Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Paganism," *Religion Compass* 6, no. 8 (2012), 390–401; Joy Dixon. "'Out of your clinging kisses … I create a new world': Sexuality and Spirituality in the Work of Edward Carpenter," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Routledge online, 2012). (24.11.2023).

Divine can be perceived through nature as feminine or as ungendered. These forms of nature mysticism were indirect precursors of lesbian-feminist explorations of matriarchy, Wicca and alternative religions in the 1970s and of contemporary queer neo-paganism.

The queer people I have discussed were deeply involved in rural England at every scale – in their home-making, in village life, in their county and region, with the landscape and soil, and in their stress on the national importance of the countryside. They sought to queerly challenge mainstream assumptions of what should be valued in the countryside, working hard to protect and conserve rural landscapes, the past and future of agriculture, and for spiritual integration in the natural world. I have touched on only a few possible threads in what is undoubtedly an extensive and important history of queer relationships and practices in rural England awaiting exploration. Openly setting up same-sex domestic partnerships was very possible in the time period discussed here, but the extent to which such relationships were recognised by others as queer is rather fuzzier. Before ideas about homosexuality were consolidated, these rural couples were treated with some latitude, according to their class status or their bohemian position as writers and campaigners, rather than on the basis of their sexuality. Being queer in the countryside was not in itself queerly disruptive.[67] Enabled by traditions of English eccentricity and the commonplace movement between city and country, queer couples and groups blended relatively easily with the 'normal,' acting as cross-currents within everyday rural life.

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My thanks go to Justin Bengry, Anna Clark and Matt Cook for discussing this article, to my History Girls writing group (Lucy Bland, Carmen Mangion, Clare Midgley, Kriztina Robert, Katharina Rowold), and to Joy Dixon for help with sources on alternative religions.

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67. Wiegman and Wilson, "Introduction."

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