

EXMOOR A CENTURY AGO

The name of A.G. Bradley is still to be found upon the bookshelves of our libraries.

There are many who treasure his books. A prolific author, he penned a multitude of words between the wars over a wide variety of subjects- biographies, autobiographies, travel and guide books. Books on the histories of Canada and of the U.S.A.

Recently when browsing through his 'Exmoor Memories,' I recalled that this winter is the centenary of his arrival in Challacombe, on the western slopes of the Moor. What an experience it must have been for this 14 year old boy from Marlborough School, the eldest son of Dean Bradley, of Westminster.

An experience which left him with some sparkling moments of life as it was on the Moor in those days. Written more than 60 years later at his beautiful home in Sussex, 'Exmoor Memories' captures much of the atmosphere and unobtrusively portrays the quiet, unspoilt countryside which bounded on all sides.

VIVID MEMORIES

Very vivid the recollections were, even to the turns of the lanes and the particular windings of the local stream. These early experiences toned all his after life. He learned to be a good shot and an expert fly-fisherman, and to acquire a love for the country and country ways.

Curiously, although he was often in these parts in later years, and he was to live until his 93rd year before he died during those dark days of the last war, he never revisited Challacombe itself. "To be candid," he wrote, "I have often shrunk from any possibility of that touch of disillusionment which we know occasionally disturbs such revisitations."

The young Bradley was sent to Challacombe to be tutored by the Rev. Robert Martin, who was Rector, and who, afterwards, was for many years Vicar of Ilfracombe. All through his book, he thinly disguises his main characters, and the exact location of many of his adventures, but to one with a knowledge of the Moor, and those that lived there during the 19th century, they are not difficult to place.

HOUSE REMAINS

Challacombe is known as Windycombe and the River Bray becomes the Brawle. (MY WORDS: IS THIS SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE MANY RAWLES IN THE AREA?) His tutor is never once mentioned by name, and John How Barrow, the parish clerk, is known as Isaac. Barrow is now a legend in these parts and still spoken of by octogenarians of Challacombe and Brayford.

The Rectory where Bradley stayed is still standing, but is no longer a cleric's house- "a double-gabled but rather rambling house of grey stone planted on a ledge in a long hill-slope forming one side of a narrow valley. A fairly picturesque house in itself, being creeper-clad, but in situation exquisite."

The three quaint cottages built to house some of the Fortescue Estate workers are now 'The Ring O' Bells,' but little else in Challacombe has changed. The enchanting tree-clad Bray still sings its way merrily along the valley, lapping the roadside and cottages- "whitewashed and slate-roofed with their pleasant reek of peat smoke." The trout are still here to be fished, and the ducks from nearby farmyards waddle by, seeking its refreshing waters.

Holy Trinity Church remains on the hill; the tiny chapel, originally of Bible Christian faith, down in the valley. A few cottages have fallen into disrepair, the old footbridge has disappeared under the fury of the Exmoor torrent, but I do not think, if Bradley could return, he would be disappointed.

During his long life, A.G. Bradley came to know many villages intimately. Few in England have remained as Challacombe has. This widely scattered moorland parish still reminds us of the days of George IV and Victoria.

In the first chapter of his "Exmoor Memories" Bradley illustrates just what a large country this then was. "Few people outside the Westcountry (sic) had in those days ever heard of Exmoor. But where and what is Exmoor, people would ask." "Lorna Doone," which apprised the world of its existence was not yet, and stag-hunting was still a comparatively local affair."

The groom, taking him in the dog-cart to Swindon on the first stage of his journey to Barnstaple, where he was to be met, had never heard talk of the place—"it sounded strange-like," he said.

At Barnstaple, Bradley alighted "on the cramped little uncovered platform, with its dim oil lamps. I peered anxiously into the gloom through the glistening raindrops for some friendly sign."

The 12-mile drive from Barnstaple on that cold January night was one which was never forgotten. "Horses, fly, and drover seemed all wrought up to a very agony of extreme endeavour. At length after plunging down a final precipice through a dark wood, we rolled across a narrow stone bridge, under which a mountain stream was thundering in spate, a new sight and a new sensation altogether to me."

LITTLE CHANGE

The stone bridge over the Bray below Kipscombe has been widened, the road has now a layer of smooth tarmac, but even a modern car in low gear groans at the steep descent from Bratton Down. All around us the scene has changed little; the sheep, the red cattle, the fox, and the badger; the moorland skyline from Span Head to The Long Stone, the ancient farmsteads nestling in their coombes—Wallover, Buscombe, Shoulsbury, and Swincombe.

"In the narrow meadowry vale below the house the upper waters of the Brawle churned and sparkled over the rocks and gravelly shallows, to fade from sight into a vista of folding hills, backed by a long, lofty cross ridge to the westward, which seemed to cut us off completely from the outer world at our only point of access to it."

"Few outsiders ventured to encounter so formidable an obstacle that led nowither—except to us and to the wilds of Exmoor, which at this end, at any rate, no tourist in those days, ever dreamed of exploring."

Bradley's portrait of Parson Martin is masterly and sets this cleric apart from his contemporaries—"unlike most sporting parsons whose achievements were chiefly confined to horse and hound, he was accomplished in almost every form of outdoor activity."

He was scholarly with an honours degree, an Oxford oarsman and cricketer, a fly-fisherman, a swimmer, a "knowledgeable" farmer cultivating a glebe of some 70 acres. A parson who could also hold the attention of his congregation.

POSTMAN'S BEER

There are other characters which come to life. William, the farm bailiff who was married to the cook, "as faithful a servant in the house as was her husband out of doors." The postman, "an elderly pedestrian," and Isaac, the parish clerk.

The postman called three times a week, and was fortified with beer, and bread and cheese, from the Rectory kitchen, for his return journey. In addition to letters, he delivered "The Times" for the two preceding days, the "Guardian" on Thursdays, and "The Field," "our particular oracle," on Tuesdays.

The "half a dozen" letters for the villagers were collected by their widely scattered owners at their leisure from the little shop, "where candles, bacon, sweets, tobacco, and snuff were sold or bartered for eggs and butter."

Isaac, the parish clerk, who conducted the local education and the church music, was "one of the greatest characters of all time in these parts," Bradley's sober opinion was that, as a type, he had few, if any, equals, and assuredly no superior in all England.

COBBLER TEACHER

By trade, a cobbler of shoes, John How Barrow was much else besides. An able schoolmaster, he was among the last of the village pedagogues who reigned before the advent of national schools and certificated schoolmistresses—a master it is said, who drew awesome dragons in his scholars' exercise books. His pupils were taught in his own cottage, at a fee of 6d each a week. He played the flute in the days of church musicians, "pricked" out manuscript music and dabbled in theology. His sonorous bass voice and resounding "Amens," his chanting of the Psalms, with a delicious accent, fascinated, and sometimes frightened, locals and visitors alike.

In this ever-changing world, the reminiscences of A.G. Bradley remain to remind us of Exmoor during the 1860's.