

CONVERSING IN WANET:
AN ANTHROPOLOGIST 'AT HOME'

When, in the early 1980s, I first moved into 'Wanet', a small and isolated valley in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, I did not really know what to make of the conversations I kept hearing local people enjoying. For instance:

'These rioters in Liverpool are disgusting,' Doris announces in her farmhouse kitchen as daughter Sarah clears the dinner plates, 'and now it's London too! Why do they let them behave like that? They should lock them up with rats!'

Seated opposite, her mother-in-law Polly nods assent; and cousin Sid, standing smoking by the Aga, joins the consensus: 'Aye! Happen rats are too good for 'em.'

Doris warms to her task: They should gas them, and then take them in unconscious. They need their wilfulness birched and beaten out of them... why do they let hooligans do things like that to innocent policemen? You know, Gran, I've never seen sights like on TV last night. Kids just throwing stones and petrol-bombs... why not stop them? Shoot at their legs and maim them. Kids of Bill's age would soon do different if they saw their elders hobbling about a bit!'

Doris wags a knowing finger as her son Bill looks down into his dessert-dish, furiously spooning the last of his custard rather than meet her eye. 'Because there's no excuse

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for causing grief,' Doris continues, 'like tipping policemen's cars over, or like smashing the windows of innocent shopkeepers on the way You know Sid, I just can't understand why the government is being so weak and soft. They go on about an illness, and finding causes. Huh! There's no illness: these rioters just need their wilfulness braying out of them!'

Sid wrings an imaginary neck as Doris pauses for breath. Polly adds her blessing: 'And that's what it says in the Bible too.'

'Right, Gran.' Sid emphatically stubs his fag-end out on the sole of his workboot. 'A few machine-guns'd soon sort them out! And you just get cheek from these kids and nowt else. From fifteen or sixteen to ... about thirty: they're all just the same. Bread-grabbing buggers.'

My experience of settling into Wanet involved the understanding of such habitual encounters between neighbours by the contextualization of their words. I came to realize that it is to misconstrue these words to remove them either from the context of the regular conversations which Sid and Doris, for example, agree to hold, or from the context of the individual views of the world which they possess, and to which the words they use in conversation elliptically allude.

Traditionally, inhabitants of Wanet were mostly pastoral hill-farmers, stocking small acreages high on steep fells, or else artisans - blacksmiths, joiners, butchers. But increasingly, farms have had to expand for economic survival. Thus land is sold, house prices rise and cottages are renovated for 'offcomers' (those who come off away) who want holiday or retirement homes or to escape the cities and start a new life.

More peripatetic offcomers swamp Wanet's 500 residents in the summer tourist season. Therefore, Wanet's 'settled village harmony' and 'outstanding natural beauty' are given the careful protection of the National Park Committee and its wardens: building and planning regulations are stringent.

The travelogues proclaim that in the 'still tranquility' of Wanet's salubrious air, larks can still be heard as in the days of the Norsemen. Doris' brother-in-law, Arthur, regaling an audience of offcomer walkers and cavers in The Eagle pub of an evening, explains that in fact the Norse heritage is the imbuing of Wanet locals with a Viking spirit: industry, self-reliance and 'helping themselves to be helped' in a harsh climate. Arthur is ambivalent about offcomers. He meets a lot, working as a factory-hand in a town over the hills; and it would be nice if more of these newcomers who were good at badminton could help pull the Wanet team out of the Third Division. But when the British Army cadets come tramping through and the local girls start fawning over them like tarts, then Arthur puts on his Guinness tee-shirt. It reads

'Genuine Irish'. It will be different, he knows, when there is a Wanet Liberation Army posting sentries on the fell tops, keeping all these 'Herdwicks' over in the Lake District. Who really needs flocks of shaggy tourists anyway?

Back on her farm, Doris and her husband are members of the Wanet Commerce Corporation. Like the Dale's publicans, artists and guest-house owners, they realise their business survival now depends on campers and caravaners, not just livestock. But then Doris also misses the past; when all these offcomers, long-haired 'Arabs', layabouts, 'Hebrews', desert-rats, were wandering elsewhere, pestering someone else.

Sid agrees. He calls offcomers 'trailing bastards'. Refusing to stay home, they come here and stick their oars in where they do not belong. They drink 'gnats' piss' lager in The Eagle, and then vomit in Wanet gardens. They leave farm gates open, while they strip naked in the fields. Or else they move in, form committees, cadge grants, and then get their building plans passed by the Park. Meanwhile, Park wardens act to locals like 'little Hitlers'. They are all liars, creating the problems they pretend to solve. And one nosey offcomer just brings in ten more, to steal locals' homes and jobs. But one day, Sid knows, they will all fall over their wallets and break their necks. Or the blind effeminate weaklings will succumb to the sodden fells. And the remainder can be done away with, so no more secrets leave the dale for outsiders to laugh at and capitalise on: offcomers are due to die.

Sid did not like me when I arrived, as anthropologist, in Wanet Town, the dale's nucleated settlement of about 150 people, and others did not have a lot to say to me. I was anomalous, and I did not realise at first how words were properties of individuals, and used in habitual talking relationships with neighbours - less examples of a standard English idiom, which I had naively assumed we might all share, then counters in regular exchanges.

Shortly after my arrival, playing darts in The Eagle, I noticed Doris and husband Fred, and Sid and wife Cathy walk in for a nightcap and a game of dominoes. They had come from an evening at The Mitre, another pub a few miles away, at the head of the dale. Before its present owner changed it, The Mitre was called The Hayrake, and Doris and friends were still in the habit of referring to it as The 'Rake. So, being friendly, I wandered over and asked her how they enjoyed it down The 'Rake; and said that next time I might accompany them down The 'Rake. Doris mumbled the politenesses due a potential customer, while Sid and others glared. What sort of usurping urban pup would steal their words, pretending knowledge of the form of life surrounding the old (and for them continuing) Hayrake, while simultaneously broadcasting his ignorance of what lay up-dale from down-dale. It was 'up The 'Rake' at least!

I found myself having to listen to Sid and Doris conversing, then, for example, before being able to participate myself. Doing

so, interactions seemed matters of habitual symbolic form: Sid and Doris would converse in formulaic fashion, one regular phrase eliciting another. Moreover, each seemed to possess a personal store of these often idiosyncratic phrases which were amended, expanded, juggled for conversational fit, but were basically repeated at different times, like abstracted sections of longer loops of thoughts. These impressions were to solidify when Doris and Sid became my conversational partners.

Doris once had a rather upper-class, offcomer neighbour who spoke the language of local government and would write pleading her case for farm improvements. But when he died, her plans were dismissed peremptorily. My relationship with Doris began, then, as a neighbourly translator of National Park edicts and writer of requisite, duplicated hyperbole. Then I also offered free help on the farm and slowly became ensconced as their farm lad. That is, I learnt to shut up, not give silly opinions on herd management which would lead to 'barneys'; learnt to avoid Doris' favourite, trained sheepdog, not pet it as if it was a stupid, city dog; and learnt to muck out the shippin ('cattle-shed') whilst Doris was milking, not drive the tractor, disturb her cows or risk her knocking me down in a set-to.

Stringing together the phrases which Doris regularly used in our different conversations, I reached what I felt was something of an understanding of a world view only partially expressed, in attenuated form, at any one time. Doris found people fated to live lonely little lives in a dump of a world, controlled by a harsh market. At best, one may find pride through business independence. But England was a sick country, peopled by fickle gloaters over misfortune, who would steal, lie, even kill, to stop you bettering yourself. English cities were bedlams, full of poor stock and ruinous habits: the results of cross-breeding. The urban working-classes were disobedient, lazy and vulgar. They refused posh standards, would not work, merely sought easy, short-term gain, and rioted. Urban youths were pathetic: taking everything to excess, with no self-control.

Once, Doris found Wanet a haven. Through the hard, traditional way of life, you could work to prove yourself and gainsay all detractors. Farming is the hardest of jobs, and on her farm, work was the first priority. With her ambition she should have been a man, but through her industry, and her commandeering of a husband and then children to help, Doris had caused the little farm her father left her to expand. Her effort had been awful, but the farm became her sanctuary. Then the dirty, unskilled and quarrelsome city folk invaded, and the National Park was set up to keep everyone poor and dependent, and eventually all dressed alike, like in Russia.

It was in her family that Doris found her last refuge of happiness - where her children would copy her and Fred, and be made loyal and respectful, and everything would be shared. But if she had to live in those riotous cities, Doris could contemplate suicide. Cities must be improved so people would not want to leave and threaten her home and family. Doris always voted Tory, as her father taught her. For only their governments may do the right

thing by inculcating in the cities realistic, upper-class values of respect for the law and property, religion, manners and hard work.

Gradually then, Doris and I negotiated relations which we found reciprocal and apt: I would keep farm secrets and work; she would keep my dim wits a farm secret. I was almost family. This found expression in our sharing of regular forms of interaction. As we ate or farmed, there was an accompanying verbal formula, such as:

Doris: Nay, I'm really stored tonight ... You know, Nigel, Sid's tongue is something else. He's really scornful. I hate that ... You haven't said anything to him about our set-up here, have you?

Nigel: Not a word.

Doris: Well, don't, will you. And make sure.

Nigel: I don't say anything about the farm.

Doris: Well be careful of Sid, 'cause last night in the pub I was telling him you were deep, and had little to say, and said nowt about anything unless you were asked. And didn't think much at all about anything, and that's true isn't it?

Nigel: Well, yes ... I keep quiet.

Doris: Right, but Sid said he just told you a whole load of lies, and then he could find out whatever he wanted to know from you. So you haven't told him owt, have you?

Nigel: Nope.

Doris: So just be careful. Fred can tell him anything he needs to know.

Nigel: Right.

Sid was a jack-of-all-trades, and a frequent visitor to the farm - but, Doris felt, no more trustworthy than anyone else. When Sid came to do some 'blocking' on the farm, I was assigned to assist. He warned me that I had better 'shape', if I was to keep up with him; that my hands would suffer at the rate at which he expected to be handed the rough concrete blocks; and that if I ever gave him cement with bits of gravel in it, he would soon kick me where it hurt. However, if I watched him quietly, in six months he could teach me so much that my brain would probably explode.

On the work site, I obediently attended to Sid's building supplies, while he repeatedly lectured me about the shortcomings of students, his family, sex, his feet, beer and Radio Two disc-jockeys. Over the weeks, we developed a routine, and I pieced together something of Sid's world view. Sid found the English way of life threatened. Traditionally, it meant a world where work and experience earned you wealth and respect: a world, supported by every true Englishman, of master craftsmen and apprentices. Jealous foreigners had always wanted to adulterate England, but now Sid

found conspiracy within: England was at the mercy of drug addicts and perverts, the lazy, spoilt and immoral. They were making Englishmen destructive, hostile and selfish. Even Sid's wife kept threatening to leave, and drove him to girl friends.

Children, Sid felt, should be silent pupils, grateful for any time adults afforded them. But with such poor role models, was it surprising that all today's kids wanted was 'aggro'? They were too cute by half in school, and then, like parasites, claimed any work afterwards was 'a hassle'. They preferred to boast fake experience with paper diplomas, or stay in expensive colleges forever. Even at home, Sid's children refused him respect, and argued black was white.

Sid felt that any animal that did not want to work was sick, and frankly, should be killed. Certainly he would not even spit on a 'punk' if he was on fire! In Wanet, at least, adults must start supporting each other: refuse to pay for grants through taxes, and wrest their home from offcomer insurrectionists. Come the civil war, true Englishmen would help the police crush all radicals, hooligans, students alike, and send the Blacks back to their barbarous African tribes.

Working with Sid, as with Doris, reciprocal talking relations were gradually reached which we found apt and legitimate. He taught me; I learnt I was in Wanet under his sufferance. For example, teaching me 'women', Sid would confide who he lusted after, and lusts he had satisfied. The following became a verbal formula often repeated, as we 'blocked' or drank in the pub afterwards:

Sid: You know, Nigel, I like proving people wrong. And proving them right if they're right. Like I'd do everything I could to prove you wrong, just like I would to prove you right ... Recently, I proved someone wrong by making love to his wife when he was only about six feet away.

Nigel: What! Really? Was he watching?

Sid: No. But he claimed that there was no one for his wife but him, and she did too, so I was happy to prove them both wrong. Now, only three people know that, Nige: you, me, and his wife

Nigel: Right.

Sid: But if four people get to know, I'll know where to come looking - right?

Nigel: I'll remember.

Sid: You do, lad. Fancy another drink?

Nigel: Sure!

I began this article with a conversation which, as a newcomer to Wanet, estranged me. I gained more understanding, I suggest, when I could later compare it with my own routine interactions with

Doris and with Sid. We had negotiated a similar reciprocation of repeated phrases; words rebounding off each other, appropriate and familiar.

Beyond the ellipsis of such oral discourse may exist various differences between speakers' larger world views, but at least superficially Doris and I, and Sid and I, met in mutual confidence about 'others'. Like the tirades I had heard from Doris and Sid concerning the strangeness of outside youth, I had learnt to converse about the vagaries of outside imbroglio, using such notions of the wider world as tokens of regular, internal conversational exchange. To criticise others' manners and mores appropriately was ever part of the currency of situational belonging.

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REFERENCE

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