

Book Review

Lee Schofield, *Wild Fell* 2022 Transworld Publishers/Penguin



There have been a number of books about farming and wild life over the last ten years or so, particularly in a Lakeland context. Two groups fiercely defending their seemingly incompatible corners; hefted sheep farming on the fells and, opposing this, a desire to allow nature to re-establish herself in an area where sheep grazing, amongst other practices, seemed inimical to this happening.

The first book was “Feral” in 2013, by George Monbiot, who wanted to rewild the fells and seemingly do away with sheep all together. He had several meetings with Lakeland Commoners which were confrontational and set the scene for future distrust and misunderstanding.

This was somewhat abated by James Rebanks, a Cumbrian and sheep farmer by birth. His autobiographical book “The Shepherd’s Life” 2015 and the later book “English Pastoral” 2020, showed how the traditional farming practices which he knew well could be ameliorated for nature’s benefit by changing land management practices, among other things.

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A further problematical issue in Cumbria, which seems to mitigate against the cause for Nature re-establishing, is the UNESCO World Heritage status for the Lake District, which emphasizes the area as a cultural landscape, hefted sheep here being of utmost significance. Add into this the presence and sometimes conflicting issues of the larger organisations, RSPB, Wildlife Trust, United Utilities and the Lake District National Park authority and there seems to be a complete recipe for misunderstanding, distrust and conflict.

The book “Wild Fell”, seems to rise above all of this and find a way through to get farming and nature conservation to be compatible. It has been the best and most hopeful read for biodiversity and Nature that I have encountered in years. Schofield, the non-farmer self styled “bookish” southerner, finds a way through this maze and describes what he does (if drawing a veil over the frustrations of getting it done) to improve conditions for Nature at the new RSPB Nature Reserve at Haweswater where he took on the role of warden in 2012, just at the time when Monbiot’s book came out.

He highlights the importance of the supportive community he found and how each of the individuals involved, be they RSPB volunteers or farmers in the neighbourhood, were all doing what they could in their respective spheres to improve biodiversity in their locality. He gives a shout out to Dalefoot Composts! No details here, about what he does, you’ll have to read the book!

While COGF is probably more gardeners than farmers, we all care about Nature and biodiversity and we all care about Cumbria. It’s local to us and relevant. And easy to read, informative, interesting and inspiring. And above all, optimistic.

Elizabeth Allnutt