

E.V. LUCAS (1868-1938)

Prolific essayist, travel writer, biographer, humorist, poet and publisher, E.V. Lucas lived for a number of years at Spark Haw on Froghole Lane.

In the closing years of the 19th century, and during the first two decades of the 20th, a coterie of literary figures gathered among the greensand hills between Limpsfield Chart and Sevenoaks. Edward and Constance Garnett built a house on the edge of the woods near Kent Hatch, E.V. Lucas lived on Froghole Lane, and both 'Supertramp' W.H. Davies and Edward Thomas - the poet who was killed in the Battle of Arras in 1917 - had homes at Weald. Drifting from one to the other, and staying for days at a time as house guests, were Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, the nature writer W.H. Hudson, and D.H. Lawrence, among others.

Though perhaps least known of these today are the Garnetts and E.V. Lucas, but in their time they were highly influential names in the world of publishing. Edward Garnett was a writer, critic and publisher's reader who became mentor to Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford; his wife Constance was the English translator of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Chekhov, while Lucas was one of the most respected and successful literary figures of his day.

Edward Verrall Lucas was the second of seven children born to Alfred and Jane Lucas, a Quaker family then living in Eltham. Educated at the Friends School in Saffron Walden in Essex, according to one source he was prevented from going on to university by his father's financial incompetence, and instead was apprenticed at the age of 16 to a Brighton bookseller where he became an avid reader.

Turning to journalism in 1889 E.V. joined the staff of the *Sussex Daily News*, later moving to London to work on the evening newspaper *The Globe*, while in 1904 he began contributing to *Punch* before being appointed the magazine's assistant editor. At the same time he was employed as a reader for the publisher Methuen, eventually becoming chairman in 1924. According to Richard Church, behind his whimsical literary façade and his *bonhomie*, Lucas was a very shrewd business man.

As if this were not enough, E.V. wrote an enormous number of books under his own name. Being highly disciplined, with a quick wit and a wide range of interests, his output as a writer was certainly prodigious. His first volume of poetry (*Sparks from a Flint*) was published anonymously while he was still in Brighton, and this was followed by more than 100 titles. From 1891 until his death in 1938, he published at least one, and sometimes as many as four books a

year, including anthologies and biographies, which led Max Beerbohm to suggest that Lucas actually spoke fewer words than he wrote.

Much of his work was light-hearted, for he had ‘a great appetite for the curious, the human, and the ridiculous. If he were offered a story, an incident or an absurdity, his mind instantly shaped it with wit and form.’ But he also wrote travel books, including the best-selling *The Open Road*; he wrote studies of painters, admitting that he knew little about pictures, but like to write about them ‘for the benefit of those who know less.’ And he wrote the authoritative *Life of Charles Lamb* in two volumes.

In 1897 E.V. married Florence Griffin (known as Elizabeth), the daughter of a Colonel in the American army, and brought her to Crockham Hill. Elizabeth was also a writer, and she and E.V. collaborated on several children’s books. They had one daughter, Audrey, who was brought up along Froghole Lane where her father had bought Spark Haw, the house at the top of Buttles Steps in which Edward and Constance Garnett had lived before him while The Cearne was being built.

Originally two detached cottages, E.V. had them made into one, an uneven dwelling with two staircases, and ‘a steep, sloping orchard where, among apple and pear trees, grew bushes of the most delicious hazel nuts.’ Spark Haw was the first home he owned and, though he disliked the name and preferred to call it Froghole, he loved it far more than any other. And with good reason, ‘for the cottage which had begun so humbly, grew step by step with his own career, each addition to its charm or comfort representing an improvement in its owner’s bank balance.’

Neighbours were few and far between, which suited E.V., for he was attracted by Froghole’s sense of isolation. But by his invitation a great many friends came to stay, often mixing business with pleasure, while of his immediate neighbours the Ingrams, who lived in the thatched cottage below, were described as ‘a very kind, very nutcrackery old couple’, and Godfrey Robinson at the farm as, ‘a most engaging character [whose] command of a certain kind of language was both masterly and picturesque.’

Lucas was a great cricket enthusiast whose collection of essays, published after his death as *Cricket All His Life*, was considered by John Arlott to be the best of all books on cricket. He played for J.M. Barrie’s team, the ‘Allahakbarries’ alongside Conan Doyle, and regularly turned out for the Crockham Hill eleven. On their way home from one home match, the Rev’d Stubbs – another enthusiast – managed to drag himself away from discussing the game with E.V.

to ask: 'How is it Lucas, that I never see you in church?' To which the reply came: 'Well, you see, I've only lived here eleven years.'

His years at Froghole were productive and enjoyable, but when new houses started to appear, he decided it was time to move on and sold Spark Haw to the American Quaker poet, Henry Brian Binns, a 'tall, gaunt, shy man' and a friend of the Garnetts.

In recognition of his literary prowess, Lucas received honorary degrees from the Universities of St Andrews and Oxford, and in 1932 was appointed Companion of Honour. Towards the end of his life he parted from his wife and lived alone, and died in a Marylebone nursing home just two weeks after his 70th birthday.

Kev Reynolds
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