

## Commemorating a lad from Slad

Author : BOB MICHELL

Categories : [Vets](#)

Date : December 8, 2014

**BOB MICHELL** BVetMed, BSc, PhD, DSc, MRCVS

**EIGHTY years ago a young man left Slad in Gloucestershire to begin a journey to Spain and entanglement in its civil war. Despite his idyllic rural background, war was an inescapable part of his life – he had been born two days before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.**

In this year of centenaries, Laurie Lee finds himself in competition with Dylan Thomas, surely a greater poet – and excellently portrayed by Tom Hollander in the television movie *A Poet in New York* – and the outbreak of the First World War, certainly a more important event.

The importance of Laurie Lee's centenary is to remind us of what a fine poet he was at his best, and how undervalued his poetry has become.

Not his prose, which remains rightly popular, but his poetry – most of which was published earlier and established his name. Yet now it is the prose that keeps this poet's name alive; indeed, his poetry was out of print until a new collection appeared in August from Unicorn Press.

Laurie Lee famously grew up in Slad, but he was born in Stroud and lived there until he was three. Slad provided an idyllic village life, much like lives for centuries before, yet, unknown to Laurie Lee, about to be overtaken by financial chaos, mechanised agriculture and the return of war.

During the Second World War, while working for the Ministry of Information, Lee made documentary films, including some in India and Cyprus. In 1951, he became chief caption writer for

the Festival of Britain – a huge undertaking. But his heart remained in the Cotswolds.

His best known work, the autobiography *Cider with Rosie*, concludes:

*“The last days of my childhood were also the last days of the village. I belonged to that generation which saw, by chance, the end of a thousand years’ life.*

*The change came late to our Cotswold valley, didn’t really show itself till the late 1920s; I was 12 by then, but during that handful of years I witnessed the whole thing happen... It was then I began to sit on my bed and stare out at the nibbling squirrels and make up poems from intense abstraction, hour after unmarked hour, imagination scarcely faltering once, rhythm hardly slipping a beat, while sisters called me, suns rose and fell, and poems I made, which I never remembered, were the first and last of that time...”*

So ends *Cider with Rosie*, but so began a creative stream, surging through him from the surrounding countryside and touching the heights of genius.

## Walk the talk

Lee’s first poem was published in 1934 and his first collection in 1944 (*The Sun My Monument*). Further volumes appeared in 1947 (*The Bloom of Candles*) and 1955 (*My Many Coated Man*); the latter included “12th Night”, which was set to music by the American composer Samuel Barber.

A further volume appeared in 1960 (*Pocket Poems*), but subsequently his reputation as a poet was eclipsed by the fame of his autobiographical prose – *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* (1969) and especially *Cider with Rosie* (1959), which gained further fame as a TV adaptation and then a film. A third volume of autobiography (*A Moment of War*) appeared in 1991. But he always thought of himself as a poet and he was an excellent reader of his own poetry. It is his reputation as a poet that is commemorated in his centenary year by the inauguration of the Laurie Lee Wildlife Way.

This six-mile circular walk around the Slad Valley combines scenery Lee worshipped and celebrated in his work, with 10 poetry posts, each displaying one of his poems against an appropriate background – literally. The beautiful oak columns have a window that displays the poem, but through which can be seen a detail of the glorious Slad Valley scenery appropriate to the text.

The complete walk takes time and energy, allowing for poems to be read and steep hillsides climbed, but it is a uniquely rewarding experience. It will remind those who know Laurie Lee’s prose of scenes from his autobiographies and those fresh to his poetry of how evocative it is.

Good prose depends on the skills of selecting words for their subtle nuances of meaning, but

poetry adds an ear for sound and rhythm. Laurie Lee combines all three even in his prose; like great novelists he can instil an image into your mind's eye in a single phrase.

If you crave oral rehydration, Lee's beloved Woolpack pub remains the heart of the village, opposite the fine church that contains a beautiful memorial window and where, in its shadow, is his simple, but lovely, grave, inscribed with some of his own verse.

If your spirits need a whole day in a time-remembered, gentler world there are few better places. But if you want to see the Slad Valley that he saw, Cotswold scenery in perfection, then go soon: despite rejection of their planning application, developers are keen to adorn it with a housing estate.

## Master of his craft

It is always dangerous to highlight particular poems; different elements of a poet's work appeal to different readers for different reasons.

But for those unfamiliar with this now unfamiliar poet here are some that may confirm the injustice of his recent obscurity. His landscapes and his love poems (for example, "First Love") are plentiful and best known, but he also wrote war poems about the Spanish Civil War, for example, "Seafront" or "The Armoured Valley", and a Christmas poem, "Christmas Landscape", which is almost mistakable for John Betjeman.

For many, including his daughter, "April Rise" is best loved, but "Day of These Days" is also exceptional. My favourite is "Apples". It begins:

*Behold the apples' rounded worlds:*

*Juice-green of July rain,*

*The black polestar of flower, the rind*

*Mapped with its crimson stain.*

*The russet, crab and cottage red*

*Burn to the sun's hot brass,*

*Then drop like sweat from every branch*

*And bubble in the grass.*

*They lie as wanton as they fall,  
And where they fall and break  
The stallion clamps his crunching jaws,  
The starling stabs his beak.*

It ends:

*I, with as easy hunger, take  
Entire my season's dole;  
Welcome the ripe, the sweet, the sour,  
The hollow and the whole.*

It seems a simple poem, yet it encapsulates that deep countryman's philosophy of rejoicing in nature in all its colours, its brightest and its most sombre: his joy in embracing life in its entirety.

Similarly, "Christmas Landscape" gives a countryman's view, as in this excerpt:

*Tonight there is no moon  
But a new star opens  
Like a silver trumpet over the dead.  
Tonight in a nest of ruins  
The blessed babe is laid.  
And the fir tree warms to a bloom of candles,  
The child lights his lantern,  
Stares at his tinselled toy;  
Our hearts and hearths  
Smoulder with live ashes.*

May the year ahead, against all odds, be as peaceful.

*Speculum.*



# Gloucestershire

## **The Abandoned Shade**

Walking the abandoned shade  
of childhood's habitations,  
my ears remembering chime,  
hearing their buried voices.

Hearing original summer,  
the birdlit banks of dawn,  
the yellow-hammer beat of blood  
gilding my cradle eyes.

Remember the tin-moon rise  
and the sunset's penny fall,  
the clasp of frost and weep of thaw  
and the winter robins.

One of the poem postings.



Laurie Lee's headstone.

IMAGE: Wikimedia Commons/Jongleur100.