Introduction: Rural Modernity in Britain

Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey

‘The last twenty years having witnessed so much change in the village, it is interesting to speculate as to the farther changes that may be looked for in the years to come,’ George Sturt writes in Change in the Village (1912), his observations on rural social history. In the book’s final section, ‘The Forward Movement’, he sets out his ideas for what he sees as a shift in outlook among the people he observes toward the changing world around them:

The changes so far observed have been thrust upon the people from the outside – changes in their material or social environment, followed by mere negations on their part, in the abandonment of traditional outlooks and ambitions; and of course in that negative direction the movement must come to an end at last. But when there are no more old habits to be given up, there is still plenty of scope for acquiring new ones, and this is the possibility that has to be considered. What if, quietly and out of sight – so quietly and inconspicuously as to be unnoticed even by the people themselves – their English nature dissatisfied with negations, should have instinctively set to work in a positive direction to discover a new outlook and new ambitions? (pp. 165–6)¹

Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention puts the focus on this new outlook and new ambitions through a study of writers, artists and other agents that investigated and helped to instigate the changes that Sturt saw coming among the rural people he writes about. Quiet and inconspicuous activities are considered in the context of dramatic changes in material and social conditions throughout Britain in order to examine the histories of relations between rural and urban places, economies, classes, identities, images, arts and cultures. The overarching goal of this project is to promote rural people and places as important yet often-ignored subjects for studies of British modernisation, modernism and modernity.

In the early twentieth century, rural areas experienced economic depression, the expansion of transport and communication networks, the rollout of electricity, the loss of land and the erosion of local
identities. Who celebrated these changes? Who resisted them? Who documented them? The fifteen chapters of *Rural Modernity in Britain* address these questions through investigations into fiction, non-fiction, film, drama, print and painting, among other genres and media. These essays make the case that the rural means more than the often-studied countryside of southern England and that examination of the cultural production and consumption of rural Britain reveals new stories about British national identity and imagination. Throughout, the book argues that ‘rural’ and ‘modern’ should not be seen in opposition but rather as two terms relating to a vital relationship that came under intense pressure during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly during the interwar years. Existing literary studies of interwar Britain examine the rural as a cultural expression of mass market and modernist writers’ fixation on ‘the countryside’, a countryside often narrowed to the scenes of southern England, populated by middle-class artists, and constructed as a site of nostalgic retreat divorced from modernity and modernisation. The modernists’ countryside is part of the story of rural modernity in Britain, but a small part. *Rural Modernity in Britain* looks beyond it, assuming that rural regions, communities, classes and figures can originate and sustain histories of and criticism on modernity and the modern.

*Rural Modernity in Britain* emphasises the great variety of experiences of modernity throughout the different regions that make up rural Britain. Just as there were real differences that marked life in cities and life in rural areas, there were meaningful differences between the rural regions of Britain and differences within rural regions themselves. While it is impossible to address all these differences in a single volume, it is possible to acknowledge that there were diverse responses to modernity and to enrich existing literary, art and cultural histories with studies of rural Britain. To achieve this goal, contributors to this volume pay attention to the distinction between Britain and England; while chapters on English rural places dominate, this is a volume dedicated to recording and exploring evidence of British rural modernity. Critical treatments of literature, art and culture produced in and about the rural areas of Wales and Scotland support the argument of the book. Rural peoples of England, Wales and Scotland, this book argues, faced similar changes to their urban and suburban compatriots, as well as changes particular to their local areas. *Rural Modernity in Britain* complicates existing narratives about national modernisation and British modernism as the isolation, remoteness and peculiar relations to the land that mark rural places made people both receptive to and suspicious of the new social relations and new forms of connectivity brought about by telegraph, telephone, radio and electricity. Traditional rural industries and villages
needed to adapt to changes in order to survive. And different models of community and productivity could be fashioned by those who chose to remain in or return to rural places as sites supporting homes, work and dreams. As this book demonstrates, representations of rural life in the interwar period were more than just paeans to a national past. While Stanley Baldwin famously said, in 1924, ‘England is the country, and the country is England,’ other voices contest his pastoral nationalism and conservative rural nostalgia. Exploring lesser-known figures, regions and genres, the chapters in this volume pry apart those supposedly synonymous terms – rural, country, pastoral, nationalism, nostalgia, conservatism – in order to admit more complex and contradictory data into the critical narrative of modernism and modernity.

Rural, country, rustic, pastoral

There are very good etymological and generic reasons why the rural, as a geographical and especially cultural category, has been treated as antagonistic to modernism and modernity. Modernism, theorised by twentieth-century critics associated with university and metropolitan centres, is a product of cities: Baudelaire’s Paris, Wyndham Lewis’s London, Kafka’s Prague, Alfred Stieglitz’s New York. Similarly, modernisms, as they have been theorised by twenty-first-century critics, depend on urban peoples and places to investigate an idea of modernism as a ‘paradigmatic shift, a major revolt, beginning in the mid- and late nineteenth century, against the prevalent literary and aesthetic traditions of the Western world’. Shifts, revolts and modern movements: all seem to oppose rural people and places, imagined for better or worse as stolid, static or stagnant. The rural functions as the Other in many of these modernisms and the critical debates surrounding them, even as they are obviously participants in and sources of some component of British modernity. The history of debate about the disciplinary and geographical domains of modern, modernism and modernity means that the rural cannot escape the city or its judgements. This is evident in the first definition accorded to the word ‘rural’ in the Oxford English Dictionary:

Rural: 1.a. of a person: living in the country as opposed to a town or city; engaged in country occupations; having the appearance or manners of a country person; (in early use also depreciative) lacking in elegance, refinement, or education; boorish.

Contemplating the dominant term in this definition, ‘country’, Raymond Williams, in Keywords (1976), observes that from the
thirteenth century it carried the meaning of ‘native land’, only coming to signify ‘of the distinctly rural areas’ 300 years later, from the early sixteenth century (p. 81). He explains that the ‘widespread use of country as opposed to city began in [the last third of the sixteenth century] . . . with increasing urbanization and especially the growth of the capital, London’ (p. 81). In the seventeenth century, after 100 more years of urbanisation, the terms ‘countryfied’ and ‘country bumpkin’ came into use as metropolitan slang (p. 81). Thus the rural life and economies that came, in the nineteenth century, to be referred to with the Scottish term ‘countryside’ were tainted with negative connotations, also conveyed by the word ‘rural’ late in the history of the English use of these words and in direct connection to urbanisation and the growth of London’s power as a national capital. While judgement of a country person or place as ‘more primitive’ is more likely nowadays to be attached to the word rustic than rural, in their current usage all these terms – rural, country, rustic – are weighted with the history of urbanisation, development, and the growth of London as a centre of national power. We cannot talk about rural without implying ‘town or city’. Nor can we talk about rural without alluding to a history of condescending judgements by urban people about their rural neighbours. This history is rehearsed here in order to acknowledge the paradoxical assumptions sustaining this study of rural modernity: that to identify rural modernity is to set apart as worthy of concentrated and special study a country life and experience while simultaneously assuming that it is inseparable from the history of modernisation more typically associated with cities and urban areas. ‘Rural modernity’ is a term that embraces the contradictory impulses that characterise so much writing about modernity. It is consistent with Marshall Berman’s judgement in All That Is Solid Melts into Air that ‘To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction’ (pp. 13–14).

Rural Modernity in Britain extends scholarly discussion of rural and rustic place addressed many years ago, most often by historians and social scientists. For example, anthropologists Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, in their volume Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy (1997), describe the aim of their interdisciplinary volume as ‘open[ing] a new approach to the subject of rural and urban places in the politics of identity’. In contrast to many theorists of place and space studies, Ching and Creed advocate adoption of ‘a theoretical middle ground’

in which ‘place’ can be metaphoric yet still refer to a particular physical environment and its associated socio-cultural qualities. In this view, place becomes a grounded metaphor. [sic]
This approach to place as a *grounded* metaphor that supports discovery and analysis of rural identities as powerful social constructions implicated in other, more studied forms of identity and power also defines the approach of the contributors to this volume. *Rural Modernity in Britain* takes up very different materials and peoples for study, but shares Ching and Creed’s determination to make rural place an axis of study for scholars of modernity in the belief that expressions and materials of rural identities are ‘a clear attempt on the part of rustic people to assert their value and place in a world dominated by urbane others’.\(^{15}\) *Rural Modernity in Britain* puts at its centre men and women who set out to know and represent the complicated reality of rural life, who respect its beauties and terrors, who represent its everyday materials, routines and scenes even as they recognise how tedious these things may be. No outsider eye of the urban pastoralist is needed for this vision of an often difficult, threadbare, threatened way of interwar living.

William Empson, in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), describes pastoral as ‘a puzzling form which looks proletarian but isn’t’ (p. 6). Pastoral’s elegant, idle, sideways look at working people has deceived many critics, who then confuse it with other forms. For example, the work of rural modernity – verbal, visual, singular or mass-produced – may look pastoral but is not, even when its forms may lead critics to endorse it as more or less experimental, more or less modernist. In contrast to criticism that seeks to categorise rural writing through its aesthetic allegiances with urban arts movements, the defining criteria of rural modernity in this volume, and thus the theory of rural modernity it advances, are not aesthetic or generic but historical, material, social and geographical. These values stand in stark opposition to those endorsed by Clive Bell, one of modernism’s ‘Men of 1914’, in his classic essay of 1914, ‘The Aesthetic Hypothesis’. Here, Bell advances both a theory and practice for understanding modern visual art as something apart from and better than representative illustration, documents or descriptive paintings (Clive Bell, p. 6). Art is, in his memorable formulation, ‘significant form’ (p. 3). This significance is ‘unrelated to the significance of life’ (p. 10) and, to appreciate art, ‘we need bring with us nothing from life . . . we are lifted above the stream of life’ (p. 9). This definition of art as pure significant form, apart from the living world, influenced generations of modern art critics. Interestingly, it is consistent with the way pastoral has come to signify in literary critical usage. From pastoral’s strictly generic and literary definition, what Renato Poggioli describes as the ‘pattern of the bucolic (from βουκόλος, guardian of cattle) . . . express[ing] a genuine love of the countryside, as well as the citydweller’s yearning for greener pastures’, modern pastoral has come
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to mean and be a place apart, out of the stream of life (Poggioli, p. 4). Poggioli describes pastoral as ‘a pause in the process of living’, an ‘oasis’ or ‘retirement to the periphery of life’ (pp. 9, 11, 11). Paul Fussell agrees, explaining that

literate ages have used the pastoral genre in large part as a compensatory device, a way of vacationing from actuality. The tradition, all the way from Edmund Spenser in the sixteenth century to Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth, provides a way of realizing conventionally an alternative to the experiential world.\(^\text{16}\)

Understood in these terms, pastoral seems to be another version of Bell’s modern art, a significant form whose power ‘is unrelated to the significance of life’.\(^\text{17}\) Bell’s modern art, like Fussell’s pastoral, depicts that which is outside life, beyond ordinary, everyday experience. Pastoral art, as understood by these mid-century critics, is fundamentally contradictory, its motivation – to express feelings of yearning, longing, often felt as that peculiar feeling of nostalgia or, literally, homesickness – at odds with its function – to provide a thing, a poem, that can satisfy or fulfil those yearnings.\(^\text{18}\) Traditional pastoral conjures images of something that is missing from life but that seemingly still exists elsewhere, in another place (the shepherds’ fields) or in another time (the Golden Age, childhood). Similarly, modernist pastoral comes to represent something precious that is absent or lost yet is simultaneously received as the very thing that can compensate for such loss.

Studies of modernist pastoral contribute to but do not complete our understanding of interwar British arts and culture, and do not replace the need for studies of rural modernity – the actual, lived, everyday realities of rural people living in and reacting to their modern times and to their experiences of modernisation. The confusion of modernist pastoral with rural modernity is understandable, given critical and institutional hierarchies that elevate modernist aesthetics above the aesthetics of works labelled popular. While it is true that Johanna Drucker could claim, in \textit{Theorizing Modernism} (1994), that in visual arts criticism the urbane, or ‘high art modernism’, is ‘no longer unquestioningly granted a privileged place by virtue of aesthetic concerns’ (p. 4), she also had to concede that ‘even these rewritings [spearheaded by feminist, deconstructive and cultural theorists] contain critical assumptions that are the legacy of modern art and theory’ (p. 4). Aware of the still-powerful effects of what Drucker calls ‘the phantoms of received tradition’ (p. 4), and writing more than twenty years after Drucker, the scholars contributing to this volume look to other disciplines, other critical traditions, for pathways into debates about British identity, modernity, modernisation
and modernism. The ‘new modernist studies’ have supported this work, demonstrating that even the most elite of modernists can serve as a vehicle for exploring popular literature. For example, in *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003), ‘new modernist’ scholar David Chinitz describes Eliot as a writer in whom the forces and figures of elite and popular culture ‘perpetually contend’, and whose work ‘issues from the contest’ (p. 7). Those who notice that the urban/rural divide maps more or less directly on to the elite/popular divide might be inclined to borrow Chinitz’s metaphor, describing rural modernity as a contest, one conducted in a specific place – rural areas, the country – in which high and low figures and forces perpetually contend.

Constructing rural modernity as cultural contest implies two methodological priorities for the scholars contributing to this volume. First, the chapters of *Rural Modernity in Britain* pursue social and cultural engagements, interconnections and interchanges between rural and urban, popular and elite, owners and workers, traditional and modern, agrarian and industrial, as well as divisions. Second, employing the metaphor of contest encourages scholars to ask about the standards and fields of play. Within modernism and modernity studies, the play of criticism has routinely been conducted on urban and university terrain. In contrast to this history, in the pages of *Rural Modernity in Britain*, people in rural places are central to academic discourse about the history and forms of the modern, modernism and modernity. The literary and cultural works they produce and have an impact on throw into question the outcome of the contest that is rural modernity so it cannot be said, with the weary conviction of Ching and Creed, that ‘In all of these discourses of place, the urbane has the last word.’

*Rural retreat in grim times: critical revaluations*

In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams famously describes the ‘escalator’ of nostalgic retrospect that finds ‘Old England, settlement, the rural virtues’ in the receding pasts of successive generations, demonstrating how the rural counterpoint to the anxieties of urbanisation and industrialisation is reconstituted through each generation of cultural production (p. 12). *Rural Modernity in Britain* argues that the interwar period is a particularly rich resource for studies of the interrelationships between the country, city, modernity and identity as radical developments were met with what Howard Newby describes as a ‘welter’ of publications about rural life and the revival of traditional arts and crafts (p. 175). More recently, Trevor Wild has argued, in *Village*
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*England* (2004), that ‘the appeal of rural idyllism became stronger than ever’ amid the threats posed by World War I, economic depression, unemployment and increased mechanisation ‘in the turbulent first half of the twentieth century. . . . It was in these grim times that the romanticized virtues of rural England and its timeless villages were elevated to beacons of moral character and a metaphor for national identity’ (pp. xv, xvi).

Romantic evocations of rural life appeared in poems, novels and guidebooks published to celebrate the ‘quiet beauty’ of these seemingly unspoil bits of Britain. During this period, many writers and artists depicted rural Britain as an escape from an increasingly urbanised world and a retreat to an almost premodern era that ‘presented the observer with a view of its past in its present’. Writings and illustrations from the early twentieth century depict rural Britain as ‘a retreat and solace from human society and ordinary human consciousness’ that Williams traces back to Virgil. The interwar period consolidated, reproduced and disseminated this image to such effect that it persists in the media of the later decades of the twentieth century and those of today. According to Alex Potts, the ‘clichéd stereotypes of chequer-board fields, hedge-rows, copses and old buildings nestling in comforting hollows found today in calendars, advertisements, films of “old England” and travel and guide books are in fact largely the creation of the period’ (p. 166). In print and on screen, a distinct image of rural Britain was celebrated in the 1920s and 1930s by writers and artists and promoted by media industry professionals as an escape from the crowds, noise, rhythms and responsibilities of modern city life. As John Lowerson argues, ‘for many people this was the “real” England and the urge to locate oneself within it was strengthened in the 1930s as never before by a powerful current of “countryside” literature’ (p. 260). But it was more than just the literature of the period that created this current. Historians like Jeremy Burchardt and geographers like David Matless have documented popular social movements and civic trends that contributed to the phenomenon of substituting the countryside for England and substituting England for Britain.

In *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900–1939* (1973), Glen Cavaliero offers a catalogue of writers on ‘the rural experience’ and distinguishes those that only ‘contemplate a static society’ from those in which ‘we are involved in a changing one’ (pp. 16, 31). He acknowledges that many rural writers ‘were conscious of the forces of change, and were interested in what was happening around them’ yet, unlike the contributors to *Rural Modernity in Britain*, he does not ask how rural areas could be the sites and sources of innovation and experimentation rather
than just social tragedy or how the novels that interest him comment on more than just their local, rural concerns but offer instances of the types of changes that were affecting other areas of Britain.  

More recent work has looked into treatments of rural Britain and what they can tell us about both British modernity and modernism. Jed Esty’s *A Shrinking Island* (2004) offers an influential analysis of the connections between late modernism and a ‘renewed interest in native and Anglocentric rituals’ amid a crisis of ‘metropolitan modernity’ (pp. 17, 19). But his shrinking island thesis and the rural subjects he explores to make his point revive the rural-as-retreat rhetoric that dominated much of the interwar writing on the countryside and that persists in much of the current scholarship on writing about rural people and activities. Alexandra Harris’s more popular *Romantic Moderns* (2010) argues that activities that revivified English traditions and celebrated local sites were part of a particular interwar strand of English modernism (p. 12). Neal Alexander and James Moran, in *Regional Modernisms* (2013), also puncture perceived oppositions between the rural and the modern. They argue that ‘regional modernisms are rarely bound to any one place exclusively, for the particulars of geography and situation may themselves be multiple, shifting, subject to doubt and the contingencies of living’ (p. 8). And Sam Wiseman, in *The Reimagining of Place in English Modernism* (2015), builds on Esty’s ‘foundation’ to emphasise ‘continuities across representations of urban and rural experience’, and to argue that ‘these are mutually influential throughout the entire interwar period’ (p. 2). The interest in reclaiming regional and rural writers as sources for studies beyond their local concerns is something that extends from Cavaliero’s work and aligns the aims of the books discussed above with those of *Rural Modernity in Britain*. Yet the contributors to this volume are just as likely to discover in rural regional texts, crafts and arts particular geographies offered up precisely because they bind readers to one place exclusively. They find that rural regional texts and objects aim to persuade readers that, no matter how deep their investment in distant, perhaps urban, contingencies of national living, representations of particular rural geographies and situations are sufficient to the demands of perception and imagination. This means that, unlike Alexander and Moran, Esty, Wiseman and Harris, the contributors to *Rural Modernity* tend to regard rural writers and artists as living in rural places that are, in their everyday aspects, already sources for studies of modernity. Assuming a modern cultural producer is or may be at home in rural places has an impact not only on what artists, writers, cultural objects and institutions scholars look at, but also on how and why we look at them.
A growing body of work sees rural people not as victims of modernisation projects pushed upon them or as throwbacks to an earlier age but as active agents in transforming the material and cultural conditions in which they lived.\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Rural Modernity in Britain} contributes to these and other revisionist studies that seek out the ‘rural equivalents’ of ‘the economic and social forces that produced urban regeneration’.\textsuperscript{27} It explores the diverse sites, skills, classes, outlooks and ideologies that the rural includes with chapters on, among others, the English-Scottish borders, Yorkshire, Cornwall and Kent, and activities such as wood engraving, weaving, film-making and pageant performances. Examining these sites and activities from the perspectives of those who lived in them, looking ‘out’ towards the urban and suburban areas of Britain with which they were connected, can help us to understand the impact of modernisation and modernity not just on rural populations but also on the nation.

Those scholars who are most actively promoting this approach to the study of rural places and cultures include Gemma Goodman and Charlotte Mathieson, who make a case in \textit{Gender and Space in Rural Britain, 1840–1920} (2014) for ‘expanding the portrayal of rurality away from the myth of a rural idyll to show instead a more diverse and complex picture of rural Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth century’ (p. 1). \textit{Rural Modernity in Britain} contributor Rosemary Shirley’s own volume, \textit{Rural Modernity, Everyday Life and Visual Culture} (2015), is largely focused on postwar Britain but its mission is sympathetic to our own. It seeks to extend ‘non-urban geographies’ beyond the familiar conception of the countryside and to ‘reactivate[e] the rural as a site of modernity’ (pp. 4, 3). Dominic Head, another contributor to \textit{Rural Modernity in Britain}, argues, in his recently published study \textit{Modernity and the English Rural Novel} (2017), that ‘the continuing rural tradition in the English novel [is] a telling response to modernity . . . all the more powerful because of its obliquity’. Head seeks to show how modernity ‘is variously defined and constructed’ by a range of rural novelists treating ‘different manifestations of mechanization, urbanization and social change’ (p. 2). Head, Shirley and the contributors to \textit{Gender and Space in Rural Britain} ‘present a nuanced portrayal of rural Britain at this time’, contributing to the broader project of cracking open the monolithic image of the countryside set out at the opening of this introduction.\textsuperscript{28} In what follows, we describe the specific chapters or case studies of \textit{Rural Modernity in Britain} that extend this early work in the field and explain how they not only facilitate interdisciplinary discourse, but also point to critical conversations that will strengthen our theoretical claims on behalf of rural modernity more generally.
The case studies

Part I of the volume, ‘Networks’, brings together three chapters that examine different ways in which the people in rural Britain were transforming their relations to each other and to people in other areas of the country through new technologies. Edward Allen’s chapter, ‘Ringing the Changes: Thomas Hardy’s Communication Networks’, puts an end to a strain of critical grief bemoaning the dissolution of idyllic country habits, including, in particular, the pealing of soundscapes past. Examining ‘the sources and channels of rural communication’, the chapter finds in Hardy’s relation to new sounds a template for rural modernity. In the next chapter, ‘Change in the Village: Filming Rural Britain’, Michael McCluskey examines amateur films about rural Britain in order to analyse the ‘visible evidence’ these films provide of the impact of modernisation. He argues that these films show off the traditional activities of local areas, but they also document shifts in rural economies and foreground the technologies and industries that constituted modern village life. Rosemary Shirley’s third chapter extends the volume’s focus on visible evidence of rural modernity; ‘Electricity Comes to the Countryside: Visual Representations of a Connected Countryside in the Early Twentieth Century’ examines an extensive range of diagrams, drawings and propaganda from the British Electrical Development Agency (BEDA) that were aimed at rural consumers. Shirley demonstrates that these images promote an understanding of the English countryside and its inhabitants as willing agents in processes that continue to shape our understanding of what it means to be rural.

Part II, ‘Landscapes’, considers rural romanticism, regional art and archives, national identities, and relations between rural modernity and the pastoral. It begins with Samuel Shaw’s ‘Weighing Down the Landscape: The Quarry as a Site of Rural Modernity’, which considers a wide range of paintings about quarries – many of which are still in rural art galleries – in close relation to the history of rural industries in such regions as Cornwall, West Yorkshire and the Scottish Lowlands. Moving from the visual appeal of the colossal to the miniature, Kristin Bluemel, in ‘Windmills and Woodblocks: Agnes Miller Parker, Wood Engraving and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain’, examines Agnes Miller Parker’s career in order to demonstrate how wood engraving’s dependence upon antique craft, modern reproductive print technologies and rural subjects contributes to the paradoxical drama of rural modernity. ‘Landscapes’ concludes with Chris Hopkins’s analysis of interwar Welsh writing in English in his chapter ‘Hiraeth and Ambiguous Pastorals: Welsh Writers,
England and Rural Modernities between the Wars’. Explaining that *horiaeth* is a word that is familiar to Welsh speakers and means grief, sadness and longing after the lost or departed and an earnest desire for what might have been, Hopkins explores how a variety of Welsh literary texts in English claimed a distinctive Welsh rural modernity, and describes the implications of these claims for our understanding of the English audiences who consumed these works.

In Part III, ‘Communities’, three chapters bring together enquiries about performance and voice, gender and community, and regional modernism. Andrew Walker, in ‘The “Uncertainty of Our Climate”: Mary Kelly and the Rural Theatre’, examines the writings of the woman who is best known as the model for Miss La Trobe, the rather eccentric playwright and director in Virginia Woolf’s posthumous novel *Between the Acts* (1941). Walker claims that Kelly’s own writings, *How to Make a Pageant* (1936) and *Village Theatre* (1939), articulate a vision of the rural theatre as an outgrowth of folk religion and mythology grounded in agricultural and fertility ritual and promoted by modern print culture, helping us understand interwar rural dramatic production in the context of changing class relations. The next chapter, ‘The Spinster in Eden: Reclaiming Civilisation in Interwar British Rural Fiction’, keeps our focus on women writers and artists in rural areas. Stella Deen traces the actions of middle-aged English spinsters presiding over the rural and urban landscapes of Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowes*, *or The Loving Huntsman* (1926), E. H. Young’s *Miss Mole* (1930) and Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding* (1936). Deen discovers in these novels a progression from a libertarian to a communal notion of civilisation, challenging critics’ assumptions that rural politics are conservative politics and that rural commitments exclude urban loyalties. This attention to feminist possibilities within rural English communities prepares us for Nick Hubble’s ‘Transformative Pastoral: Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s *A Scots Quair*’. Turning to Gibbon’s fictional communities in the Mearns in northeast Scotland, Hubble draws on the work of feminist critics and theories of the pastoral to consider how Gibbon’s trilogy relates modern classed subjectivity and intersubjectivity to the ‘land’ in its broadest conception.

In the past, scholars of rural Britain were quick to interpret interwar interest in British ‘heritage’ as a powerful sign of the consolidation of particularly English identity around images and scenes of a rural Britain drenched in conservative politics of class, sex and race. Part IV, ‘Heritage’, attempts to complicate this critical narrative through examination of craft, art and architecture that take their inspiration from forms or processes associated with rural areas in order to engage with imaginings
of a modern Britain. ‘Borderlands: Visual and Material Culture in the Interwar Anglo-Scottish Borders’, by Ysanne Holt, traces the path of artist Ben Nicholson and his first wife, Winifred Dacre, to a farmhouse in the village of Banks on the edge of the English–Scottish border. Holt finds there, within a rugged terrain often imagined as primitive and romantic, a culture of crafts and especially of textile production that supports a vision of the Borders as fluid, dynamic and avowedly modern, with a distinctive cross-border or ‘borderland’ aesthetic that merged modernism and modernity and combined national and international sources with local histories and forms of heritage. Also confronting stereotypes of British heritage, Nigel Harrison and Iain Robertson examine the history and politics of Britain's most famous (or infamous) preservationist in ‘Beyond Portmeirion: The Architecture, Planning and Protests of Clough Williams-Ellis’. In this chapter, Williams-Ellis, leader of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and the Design and Industries Association, and author of the most famous protest against interwar development, *England and the Octopus* (1928), becomes a figure whose writings and activities yield an interesting tension between his forward-looking, rationalist and modernist ambitions and his desires to protect the places of the English (and occasionally Welsh) countryside from the material manifestations of these ambitions. Concluding the ‘Heritage’ section is Dominic Head’s chapter ‘Celebrating England: “Heritage” Writing and the Rural Novelist’, which summarises and analyses the heritage writing of novelists Doreen Wallace, H. E. Bates, Adrian Bell, Leo Walmsley and Francis Brett Young. Head argues that the non-fiction genre of heritage writing is ideally suited to the study of rural modernity, with the potential to demonstrate and generate a self-consciousness about nation, class and identity that is inseparable from a pervasive anxiety about modernisation.

*Rural Modernity in Britain* concludes with Part V, ‘Wars’, which seeks to understand how writers and artists in rural Britain, in conjunction with urban producers and distributors, integrated that most modern of experiences, world war, into their experiences of rural life and regions. In ‘Altered Countrysides: Paul Nash, David Jones and Eric Ravilious in Wartime’, Eluned Summers-Bremner considers how three interwar English artists sought comfort from their experiences of World War I in renditions of rural landscape that were also occasions of advance mourning for future international conflict. She argues that in images of the rural by these three men, who were war artists and soldiers, we are looking not at a product of rural nostalgia but at something more prescient. Also examining outsider wartime artists, Hana Leaper and Polly Mills discuss Vanessa Bell’s and Duncan Grant’s commissioned mural
project for Berwick Church, undertaken during the years of World War II. Their chapter, ‘Eden in Sussex: Atheist Moderns and the Berwick Church Murals’, explores the relationship between dissenting voices in the local community and the support for the mural project from the Church and artistic establishments that overrode these concerns. Rather than dismissing Bell’s and Grant’s work in Sussex as irrelevant to twentieth-century culture, as do most mainstream historians of art, this chapter demonstrates that the move to the countryside and the privileging of the domestic, local and everyday made Bell and Grant vital interpreters of rural modernity.

The prescient fine art of Nash, Jones and Ravilious, and the atheist church murals of Bell and Grant arguably find their cultural destination in the popular English Heritage and Face of Britain books examined by Peter Lowe in ‘Rural Modernity in a Time of Crisis: Preservation and Reform in the Books of B. T. Batsford’. In this final chapter of Rural Modernity in Britain, Lowe argues that Batsford’s decision to keep volumes from the series in print during wartime enabled the books to play a significant role in the construction of an idea of English and British cultural identity that proved vital to the nation’s defence. At the same time, though, wartime events enabled Batsford authors to adopt a more conciliatory tone on the issue of postwar rebuilding and restructuring, contributing to the integration of conflicts over rural modernity into larger debates about exactly which ‘Britain’ was to emerge from the Second World War and survive into the twenty-first century.

Each chapter in Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention engages with alternative views and different constructions of distinct rural areas of Britain that were inseparable from those modernising processes and experiences that attended the nation’s confrontation with and responses to significant change. The volume section titles on ‘Networks’, ‘Landscapes’, ‘Communities’, ‘Heritage’ and ‘Wars’ draw attention to dominant themes that organise these alternative views and different constructions. However, since each chapter also provides detailed studies of artefacts and ideas that appear in chapters in other sections, we have included ‘In dialogue with’ editorial notes at the end of each chapter, directing readers to alternate sections of the book. These suggestions for continued interdisciplinary conversation reinforce the rhetorical and structural commitments of the volume to diverse methodological approaches for the study of rural modernity. They also represent our intention that this volume function as a classroom text, inspiring students of twentieth-century literature, arts and culture to engage with new materials in the interdisciplinary study of modernity. Together, the chapters seek to persuade readers that rural areas cannot
be viewed only as retreats from modernity but must also be seen as modern spaces inviting us to consider the diverse effects of new ways of moving, communicating, producing and perceiving. Writers, artists and designers who granted rural people subjectivity and represented rural places and activities as central to the nation’s experience of modernity offer more than mere depictions of objects arranged in a seemingly disappearing landscape. Their work provides examples of the ways in which local communities were responding to the opportunities made available to them. Moreover, many of these writers, artists and designers offered up their treatments of rural subjects for contemplation and consumption by rural peoples themselves. This is not to suggest that the project of discovering and theorising rural modernity should be limited to examination of rural or regional objects, images and audiences, but rather that these things can teach us about active cultural agents in the processes of national modernisation. The scholars contributing to this volume hope to extend their study and conversation about the rural, the modern and the nation to twenty-first-century readers who may recognise, in the history of interwar rural Britain, sources for understanding their own engagements with modernity.

Notes

The editors are indebted to many people for help with this Introduction and volume. We particularly wish to thank Ben Child of Colgate University, who shared with us selected chapters from his excellent and at that time unpublished manuscript Uneven Ground: Figurations of the Rural Modern in the U.S. South, 1890–1940, which meaningfully influenced our theorising of British rural modernity. The annual conference of The Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914–1945 has been a constant source of intellectual development for both editors, and many of its regular members provided encouragement and enthusiasm over the course of this volume’s development.

1. George Bourne was the pseudonym of George Sturt.
2. See, for example, Lowerson, Chase, Burchardt, Newby, Howkins or Wild for accounts of this tradition in popular culture. For a classic account of the literal and literary escapes of interwar literary elites to ‘pastoralia’ – both English and European – see Cunningham, ‘Somewhere the Good Place?’ For a more recent account, see Alexandra Harris.
3. For literary studies of American rural modernity see Casey, Farland and Child. See Brooker and Thacker for essays that construct a spatial history of modernisms in relation to the geographies of postmodernism, globalisation and postcolonialism, and Gaonkar for essays that advance site-based readings of modernities from transnational and transcultural perspectives.
4. This study does not address rural modernity in Northern Ireland, even though it was, after 1922, a British nation or region equal in political status to Scotland and Wales. Irish rural modernity deserves full treatment by scholars with expertise in the Irish nations’ separate experiences of and creative reactions to modernisation. For a study that addresses several of these concerns, see Frawley, *Irish Pastoral*.

5. See for example Brassley, Burchardt and Sayer’s study *Transforming the Countryside* for comparative study of electrification, rurality, and modernity in England, Wales, and Scotland.


7. See, for example, Bradbury and McFarlane’s classic study, *Modernism*.


9. See, for example, Bradshaw and Dettmar’s *Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, whose last section, ‘Other Modernisms’, fails even here, at the end, to find room among chapters on ‘Modernism and Gender’, ‘Modernism Queered’ and ‘Global Modernisms’ for examination of modernism’s relation to rural experiences, culture and sites.


11. Williams, *Keywords*, p. 81.

12. ‘Rural’, in *Online Etymological Dictionary*.


17. Clive Bell, p. 10.


19. See Walkowitz and Mao’s introduction to *Bad Modernisms* for a useful definition and brief history of new modernist studies.


22. Blunden, *The Face of England*, p. 120.


25. Cavaliero, p. 100.

26. See, for example, Brassley, Burchardt and Thompson, *English Countryside*; Outka, *Consuming Traditions*; and Clewell’s *Modernism and Nostalgia*.
