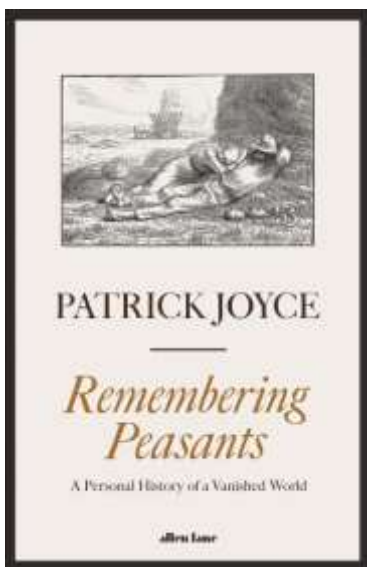


SEEING THROUGH PEASANT EYES:

**PATRICK JOYCE, *REMEMBERING PEASANTS: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF A VANISHED WORLD*, LONDON, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, 2024
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Patrick Joyce has, across half a century of historical work, shifted with theoretical conventions. He has journeyed from Marxist history from below, through post-structuralism and a Foucauldian emphasis on governance, to reflection on positionality in history and conventional memoir. Yet he has consistently focused on illuminating the lives of working-class people. Joyce's professional life has been coterminous with the disappearance of the industrial working class, and he sees the last eighty years as representing the dissolution of the peasants as a class. Logical, then, that we should get a personal history of this 'vanished world' from a man raised by Irish peasants in postwar London. The result is a visual, evocative and provocative call to remember, look at and listen to European peasants. While Joyce's patchwork approach to the peasant is at times frustrating, the combined richness of ethnographic detail and historiographical observation in his discussions compel readers to accept his broad definitions.

I, like many Europeans, am a descendant of peasants. On my father's side, from small farmers close to Wolverhampton in the English midlands, and on my mother's from Fermanagh in the North of Ireland who migrated to Scotland's industrial East during the Irish famine. We are to assume that my father's mother, from Dublin, is also descended from peasants somewhere along the line, but we do

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not know how far back. These facts were not repeated across recent generations of my family, but are known to us as part of the most recent craze for ancestry and genealogy. While this fixation on the past was analysed by historians in the 1990s, Joyce's emphasis on personal pasts is highly compatible with contemporary literary fiction's autobiographical turn, and broader attempts to identify roots in our unstable present.¹

There is a sense of moral duty in Joyce's claim that for the children of peasants 'a kind of redemption may lie in honouring our forebears, for surely children should pay respect to their parents...their ancestors.' He cautions that capitalism seeks to erase the past, that there is moral and political work to be done in remembering a very different economic and social life, which has slipped from view very quickly. In trying to detail the end of European peasant life, Joyce encounters some trouble. He believes that 'after 1945 the demise of this way of being was rapid, more rapid in western than in eastern Europe,' but his evidence points to just as fast a rate of decline in eastern Europe. He convincingly outlines the tremendous change in Ireland, Spain and Portugal, but fails to fit the differences between Poland, Russia, Romania and former Yugoslavia into his framework about 'West' and 'East'. One bizarre claim is that in 2019 'None of the former countries that made up the former Yugoslavia had more than 5 per cent in agriculture.' This is a rare exception to a general omission of post-Ottoman Europe within his discussion.

This focus on a vanished world can probably be traced back to his attempts to understand the twentieth century through two of its finest writers and thinkers—W.G. Sebald and John Berger. Berger drew attention to the sunset of peasant life in his classic 1979 essay 'Why Look at Animals', and in his personal life and literary work was oriented towards rural France. Sebald's body of work starts with the holocaust, and broadens into universal meditations on loss and decay. If there is a melancholy note in *Remembering Peasant*, Joyce has been keen to acknowledge his debt to Sebald, simply stating: 'What else but sadness can one feel when looking at the 20th century?'² The word *looking* is vital here, with both Berger and Sebald being writers intensely concerned with seeing, particularly in the latter's creative use of photos on the pages of his literary works.³

Joyce's immense strength is interpretative, and chapters on dwellings, spirituality, Christianity, and suffering, interspersed with personal stories and

¹ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, (Verso, 1994).

² Julian Conman, 'Patrick Joyce: 'The history of peasants is one of their silence or being silenced'', *The Guardian*, February 3rd 2024, Patrick Joyce: 'The history of peasants is one of their silence or being silenced' | Autobiography and memoir | The Guardian, accessed online 10/09/2025.

³ See Clive Scott and Nick Warr eds. *Shadows of Reality: A catalogue of W.G. Sebald's photographic materials*, (MIT Press & Boiler House Press, 2023).

photographs, do succeed in bringing this world to light. Peasants were both 'outside history', and firmly within tradition; they 'retarded progress', yet were a measure of progress. Peasants saw words as 'things', objects with incantatory power: 'The word is not a symbol, as it is to us'. The peasant system of belief was a merger of 'the natural, the spirits and God', all of which could be in solidarity or working against them. Importantly, he rejects any sense of absolute rupture with this past, both in his refusal to admit that peasant Europe is no more, and his insistence, reminiscent of Jacques Le Goff and historians of *mentalités*, that peasants adapted to industrial time, through newspapers, elections and armies, but that 'this knowledge was lived alongside much older ways of experiencing time, sometimes with, sometimes without contradiction'.

Joyce is masterful when he writes about his Irish ancestral homes, Joyce Country in the West and Wexford in the Southeast. Yet he also offers incredibly vivid accounts of pilgrimage in communist Czechoslovakia using Marketa Luskáčová's photography, as well as the Basilicata and Lucania of Carlo Levi and Ernesto De Martino. Following John Berger, he speaks of the legitimacy of outsider homages in ethnography, and case studies join a more closely followed focus on peasant Poland, aided by the considerable support of Michał Rauszer of the University of Warsaw. These stories flourish and spring off into a strange universalist patchwork of European peasant life, which is not chronological, in line with the circular peasant conception of time.

'When they are remembered at all, peasants get the scraps of what is left.' Nonetheless, Joyce explains to us how peasants themselves remember: 'The well-trodden path of many walking feet, which we call social memory, takes the form of stories, and, like stories in general, is formed around a set of characteristics and plots, which form the architecture of remembering'. After peasants remembered, in the era of the industrial working class, 'social memory was locked up in industrial culture, in urban villages and small towns...as much as in peasant culture.' This was the 'unilinear, progressive time of a modernity' which, from the 1970s, 'fell apart before the workers' eyes.' That which was locked up, then, lives on in our fragmented and shattered culture, but presumably remains intact where peasant life is still lived or remembered, places less touched by industrial modernity.

There are particularities within the European peasant story that mean remembering must vary: in Britain and Germany there is a form of amnesia, while in Ireland and Spain the peasant past is well within living memory. In Romania and Bosnia, peasants are present. But Joyce's attention, best expressed in his repeated use and critical description of photographs, calls for us not only to see European peasants, but to look at the world through their eyes. We are not to return to the peasant past, but to confront our contemporary condition, particularly to recognise natural resources and knowledge as finite, as our forebears did. Full as it is with

rich historiographical observation and ethnographic detail, this is a provocative and enjoyable jumping-off point for scholars interested in European peasants, whether from the perspective of empirical research or historiographical reflection. This is a rare example of a trade book by an academic which will engage and inspire scholarly and broader reading publics.

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