

Nelson

Antony Beevor

THATCHERS, SOMERSET
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When I was a small boy in east Kent in the 1950s, my hero was a woodsman called Nelson. Today, of course, he would be called a tree surgeon. He had white hair, a smiling, cherubic face and clear blue eyes. He was one of the kindest people I had ever met, as well as one of the bravest, working high in the branches of tall trees. In those days, there were no hydraulic towers and nobody wore hard hats.

My mother was the same age as Nelson and remembered him from her childhood. Nelson, the only son of a young widow, had been sent to the village school dressed as a girl. My mother told me this detail years later after she had heard a programme on the wireless. Apparently, in certain parts of the countryside, a belief had persisted up to the First World War that fairies would snatch a solitary male child. As a result, fearful mothers tried to pass their sons off as girls until the time they reached puberty. I immediately wondered whether my childhood hero had been teased or bullied at school. He certainly would have been hounded today in any urban playground. But in the real countryside community, one still finds a spontaneous kindness and tolerance of eccentricities unimaginable in city life. Today, fortunately, nobody would be frightened by superstition into sending a boy to school dressed as a girl, yet peculiarities still tend to be cherished. Even difficult characters are spoken of with a grudging admiration, if only because they provide endless food for conversation.

The pace of change – technological, economic and above all social – has been bewildering for everyone, yet up to now, the family and community has suffered far less disintegration in the countryside than in the city. But now the economic basis of farming and the traditional rural economy are in mortal danger. The attitude in Whitehall seems to be, 'Well, in the 1980s it was coal mining and the old heavy