

FENWOMEN

A Portrait of Women in an English Village

MARY CHAMBERLAIN

Introduced by Alexandra Harris



A VIRAGO
MODERN CLASSIC

VIRAGO

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INTRODUCTION

Fenwomen, originally published in 1975 as the first book from the new Virago Press, is a portrait of a community seen through the eyes of its women. It is a collage of those women's voices, echoing, countering, and continuing each other. Here are the young, deciding what they want to be when they grow up. Here are the very old, moving in a breath from reflections on the present to girls'-eye visions of the 1890s.

Mary Chamberlain was engaged in a pioneering work of oral history at a time when methods for recording women's lives were just beginning to be worked out. She insisted that the business of a feminist historian was as much in the fields of East Anglia as in the streets of Camden. She made a book about one village in all its utter particularity, distinct from everywhere else. Yet it was also a sampling, suggestive of questions, if not answers, that might be investigated across the country.

Fenwomen is life-writing: a form of group autobiography. It is place-writing – of a kind in which place is not looked at and described but felt in the rhythms of movement, the

toughness of outlook, and intense attachment that may be shot through with hatred. It catches with extraordinary vividness the routines and concerns of its moment in the mid-1970s, and, reaching back in memory, it suggests patterns of experience across a full century. It has the power to shock us in the present – with the extremity of what women have endured, and with the familiarity of tensions that are still far from resolved.

Chamberlain gave the name ‘Gislea’ to the Cambridgeshire village of Isleham. It had always been an isolated settlement, its houses gathered on a small rise of chalk, flanked on two sides by rivers and surrounded by thousands of acres of fen. Without continuous management, this would be a great East Anglian sea. Ditched and drained, it is peat country: the Black Fen. ‘Black fen, hard lives’ in Chamberlain’s taut summary of the situation. The island-like character of the village is strongly attested by those who never wish to go beyond its bounds and those who can’t stand it a moment longer.

A guidebook might describe Isleham Priory (Norman, Benedictine), but no one in these pages has time or inclination to wander among the exultant arches of long ago. The things that matter here, that define people’s sense of where they are, are things that would elude the visitor passing through. The relationship between people and land runs deep, though only a newcomer to the village talks of views or skies. Lives are governed by the combination of vastness and constriction. The fields stretch in all directions, but few people express much sense of freedom. The paths run

straight and narrow, with ditches either side. The community is close-pent and watchful. Domestic life is compressed into a few rooms. Time is regulated by the requirements of employers, children, husbands, and social expectation.

The landscape is known by the distances that must be walked, or long days spent working the earth. These women have knelt on the damp soil until rheumatism stops their joints from bending, but most are more content out here than alone with the household chores. Marjory Reeves, who would have liked a different life of learning and conversation, finds compensatory meaning in what she does. 'Down on the land, seeds, seeing them grow and come out, that fascinates me. It's a fulfilment.'

Chamberlain prefaces the text with verses from *The Women's Labour*, published by Mary Collier, 'the washerwoman of Petersfield', in 1739. The presence of this earlier voice opens up a great expanse of time through which women have been working day and night for meagre pay and little acknowledgement. Men might down tools at nightfall and expect a meal, but no such luck for their wives: 'When ev'ning does approach we homeward hie / And our domestic toils incessant ply'. Reading *The Thresher's Labour* by Stephen Duck (1730) with such attention it was 'soon got by heart', Collier was gripped by the idea that a rural labourer might become a poet, and keen that those working on the land should tell their stories. But Duck belittled women's fieldwork and ignored everything else they were unquestioningly relied upon to do.

The 'georgic' tradition of writing about agriculture, stemming from Virgil's *Georgics*, honoured the seasonal cycle of outdoor husbandry. To plough and sow, to prune and thresh: this was necessary and rewarding work. No mention of cleaning the baby, nursing grandmother, or turning scant supplies into dinner. These responsibilities go on unvariegated by daily and seasonal rhythms of work and rest. Exasperated, angry, steadily reasonable, Collier exposed the strain of continual multi-tasking and lack of recognition in ways that reverberate among the voices of twentieth-century Isleham. 'So many things for our attendance call / Had we ten hands we could employ them all.'

Chamberlain thought of her project as a 'feminist *Akenfield*'. Ronald Blythe's 1969 *Akenfield* offered a highly original and influential 'portrait of an English village' by letting its people describe the place and their work. Saddler, wheelwright, schoolmistress, blacksmith: each gave their view of things. Listening for 'the voice of Akenfield, Suffolk, as it sounded during the summer and autumn of 1967', Blythe was elegiacally conscious of recording what had never been adequately registered in national history or literature and was now disappearing: craft knowledge, forms of community life, vernacular expression, and whole ways of thinking about the world. 'The clay acres themselves are the only tablets on which generations of village men have written.'

And the women? *Akenfield* was an inspiration and model for Chamberlain, as well as a provocation. She saw that oral history was of utmost value if rural working lives were to be

understood. She also saw that the ‘voice of Akenfield’ was largely male – and so thoroughly did readers associate rural life with the shepherd, the farrier, the orchardman, that few had noticed the imbalance. To study rural work was to study the trades of men. Still, Blythe had made a significant start: he included a series of women’s voices, each testimony startling, each suggestive of hidden currents of experience, knowledge and emotion. The nurse remembers how mothers would lie rather than admit they had nothing to feed their children. The farmer’s wife admits to feeling ‘extraordinarily helpless and locked away’. They speak from the peripheries, away from the stackyard where the thatcher has finished the ricks so finely, and from the forge where the smith is known for his work and takes pride in it. Chamberlain’s ‘portrait of the women in an English village’ put their voices at its centre.

Fenwomen in turn inspired other writers. Forcibly struck by what they read, Caryl Churchill and the director Les Waters took a Joint Stock Theatre workshop to the fens in autumn 1982, talked to as many people as they could, and built their own sense of lives in this landscape. The play Churchill wrote included some of what she heard verbatim, as well as images and experiences from Chamberlain’s book. *Fen* opened at the Almeida the following year, with a remarkable set by Annie Smart in which the stage was a field, surrounded on three sides by the walls of a house. The field was hemmed in, as if it were a room; the room required constant work, as if it were a field. Churchill dramatised the

fenwomen's labour on this stage, with young and old on their knees to harvest potatoes or onions. Mary Collier in 1739 would have seen exactly the point.

Churchill drew on the testimony of the most extravagant storyteller in *Fenwomen*, eighty-three-year-old Gladys Otterspool (not her real name: all names were changed). Gladys recounted girlhood memories of being shut in a cage by a frightening old woman; she told ghost stories from before she was born but which had been richly present in her mind through eighty years. All this went straight into the mythic vision of Churchill's play about women held captive in a sinister place and by exploitative economic traps.

Where most of Mary Chamberlain's interviews purposefully emphasised ordinary routines, life's practicalities, and the humdrum but emotive dynamics of WI and village hall committees, Churchill veered in a different direction. Her play is gothic in a major key. Repressed longings are here writ large between thick mists. Ghosts shout revenge. A passionate young woman without hope asks her lover to kill her. *Fen* is bold, fantastical, weird and furious. It sets alight the distress and anger that many of Chamberlain's interviewees had tamped down with their quiet resourcefulness. The dramatist and the social historian offer alternative feminisms that throw each other into complex, and complementary, relief.

What would survive of Gladys Otterspool if no oral historian had come along? Almost nothing, so far as records are concerned. Her name and address in the census every ten years, a marriage date in the register. What she knows is written

nowhere else. It's striking how many women here, asked about themselves, take the opportunity to put their mothers' lives on record. So Meg Ladell bears witness to the labour of her mother, who scrubbed the butcher's shop in return for a little meat to feed her children and sat up through the night pegging rag-rugs to sell.

Chamberlain holds herself back as far as possible, but much of the story here is in the juxtaposition of accounts. Once we've heard from the teacher who thinks careers are not a good idea for girls, it's no surprise to hear children announcing their ambition to be housewives. The new village playgroup is the subject of painfully conflicting opinions.

One other juxtaposition stays sharp in my mind. Elderly Sybil Hayhoe thinks back with pride on the white cap and apron she wore in domestic service. Marjory Reeves thinks with horror of the cap worn to serve at table in a Cambridge college. She should have been talking among the students, only her family could not afford for her to take up the place at grammar school that would have led to university. To wait on those undergraduates involved too painful a negation of herself; she took off the cap, went back to the farm and made the best of it. No census would record the shadow life she led in her mind as a reader and thinker. It is saved up here and will be passed on.

Alexandra Harris, April 2025

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All data referred to can be sourced from the Office of National Statistics, on line.

When Ev'ning does approach we homeward hie
And our domestic Toils incessant ply;
Against your coming Home prepare to get
Our Work all done, our House in order set,
Bacon and Dumpling in the Pot we boil,
Our Beds we make, our Swine to feed the while;
Then wait at door to see you coming Home,
And set the Table out against you come.
Early next morning we on you attend;
Our Children dress and feed, their Cloths we mend:
And in the Field our daily Task renew,
Soon as the rising Sun has dry'd the Dew . . .
Our tender Babes into the Field we bear,
And wrap them in our Cloaths to keep them warm,
While roundabout we gather up the Corn.
What you would have of us we do not know:
We oft' take up the Corn that you do mow;
We cut the Peas, and always ready are
In ev'ry Work to take our proper Share;
And from the Time that Harvest doth begin,
Until the Corn be cut and carry'd in,
Our Toil and Labour's daily so extreme,
That we have hardly ever Time to dream.

Mary Collier, *The Women's Labour: an Epistle to Mr Stephen Duck*; in answer to his late poem called 'The Thresher's Labour', 1739

From *Hidden From History* by Sheila Rowbotham

I

Facts and Figures 1975

Black fen they call it round here. Black – for the dark peaty soil; black – for the mood of the area, for its history and for its future. Black fen, reclaimed marsh from Cambridge in the south, to Wisbech in the north. Flat, flat land, extending as far as the eye can see with no distinguishing characteristics which for a stranger would separate one monotonous stretch from another. Hedges and trees are fast disappearing, creating for the farmer a few more valuable feet per acre but also encouraging the wind, which needs no additional incentive here. It blows relentlessly, gathering in its wake valuable topsoil and depositing it in the homes of the villagers and in the dykes and ditches crucial for drainage. ‘Fen blows’ they’re called, dust-storms as thick and as black as smog. Fenland – isolated, rebellious, frustrated.

‘Tell us again how you met your husband,’ one of the village women, a landworker in her fifties, asked me. ‘I love that story. I love romance and true love. There weren’t