

FRED BEER TO WATERGAP

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(*The Independent Magazine* publishes a column, "Heroes and Villains". Here, Didymus comes up with a hero fit for *Resurgence*, and the New Year.)

POOOR JOB FOR those whose hero or heroine's off the shelf, subject to the hearsay of history or to their own account of themselves. I'll have mine here and now, and right next door. My neighbour for thirty years. Fred Beer over the road in Watergap (which means there's a stream each side of the house).

Fred's into his seventies and lives where he's lived every day of his life. In the valley, most days within sound of the sea. The sea's half a mile away, not that he visits it often. Mrs Beer, his mother, went down to the sea just once. Someone from away persuaded her. "Noisy old thing, didn't like 'm one bit. Got along home."

Fred most likely would have married, but his girl didn't like his proviso — that nights he'd continue to drive Father and Mother into the village, to The Anchor and to Aunt's. Heroes don't have regrets, or not that you'd notice. Fred lived with his parents, and was part of a way and a wisdom that's almost gone.

There's talk these days about self-sufficiency, but this was the golden brand. Wood enough, and the Rayburn never went out. Ten cows to whose pace the world must turn. The milk-cheque, and milk in the big enamel jug, and the cream in the tidy-pasty or over the apple — the real cream, warm and crusty with a sweet aftertaste of the shippin. Pickling, and the pig killed at Michaelmas. The meadows down the valley — almost certainly the most beautiful in the entire world, with hay-making in June and Mother's tea in the dining-



Fred Beer, hero of the earth

room that would last all year. The old man grew the vegetables — shallots, onions, greens, kidney beans and tiddies. And the Missis did the flowers and a few visitors. Fred ran the rest.

Or rather he walked it, hazel-stick in his hand, cap on the back of his head. First thing in summer would be Fred calling the cows, and winters last thing the cow-burp and the purr of the milker in the haysweet shippon. It seemed to me there was nothing in an unhurried world that Fred couldn't do — masonry, treat footrot in sheep, the drains, find a use for whatever the last Norwester had delivered on the beach. But machines were his first love — old machinery. That robust farm machinery of the thirties and forties that seemed to carry the for-all-time design mark of a Devon shovel. He could tinker life out of a heap of scrap — an old bailer was his favourite. From my work-hut I'll hear on still days this spell of

content, the slow tap of hammer on metal, and know I'm waiting for something to chatter into life. Ragged at first, but after a minute or two even the machine takes on the slow sustainable pace of the valley.

Sustainable, that's the word. The years have seen any number of folk from away, clued up on books, trying to start a new self-sufficient life. Morning to night they run to catch up. For a few months — until the oilseal goes in the rotavator, and the housecow's got mastitis, and the blight's got the potatoes, and the craft shop can't shift the macramé, and the neighbour's kids have telly, and it's no odds they're just going to have to buy in some coal . . . and they pack it in. But then this was never the golden brand. It was never going to be sustainable.

It was after the old man and the Missis passed on, and Fred continued on his own that I realized my admiration was the sort one keeps for one's heroes. Whatever

changed it wasn't the way of life. Somewhere men at their desks had drawn up their quotas and put paid to his cows. But not their slow swing of the hip when the udder's full, not the ten minutes lent on a stick while your cows drink in the stream, not the sustainable pace that is Earth's response to the seasons — that's something Fred embodies as a swallow embodies the possibility for the big journey south.

Fred's on his own but nothing's changed. Leastways the slow time ticked out by the clock in the kitchen. And it's time enough to get things done, and to remain alive. The rows of shallots, they're still straight's a rod. And the bees still come to the dahlias in Mrs Beer's garden. The tractor's out most mornings and comes back at dinner. Thursday's the pub. Time at the cow's pace, but the week's office is strict as a monk's.

And for me the mystery is that when I've called in on Fred — he's there leaning with his back to the sink — and we've had our yarn about the weather (we get plenty of that hereabouts, a fresh load of it through every day), and we've stood a bit in silence, and finally we've nodded and I'm walking back across the lane to our place, I feel lightened. I feel in touch with some sort of light, and a way of living by which fear is largely dismantled. In fact a hero's way. I feel in touch with a wisdom I can't put a name to — if it isn't the Earth's. ●

John Moat's collection of poems, Firewater and the Miraculous Mandarin, is published by Enitharmon at £5.95.