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The Early Twentieth-Century Countryside of Bernard Samuel Gilbert: Lincolnshire Poet, Novelist, Playwright, Pamphleteer and Correspondent, 1911-14

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The writings of Bernard Samuel Gilbert (1882-1927) form a rich body of primary source material. However, they lie little known and neglected. Gilbert's life and output have yet to attract a literary biography. Gilbert's writing includes poetry in dialect verse, historical novels, stage plays, political pamphlets and newspaper correspondence. This investigation focuses on the early, formative work published by Gilbert between 1911 and 1914, while he was still living in Lincolnshire. The research identifies a number of interconnecting themes in his writing that are prominent among the interests of early twentieth-century rural historians: landscape, culture and the formation of regional identities; the nature of the rural, the character of country class and labour relations, and perceptions of the town and countryside; and, in addition, the interrelationships existing between party politics, agriculture, improvement and the state of the countryside in this period. This article, as well as bringing the work of Gilbert to wider attention, is an interdisciplinary exercise in the use of literary sources in regional, rural and agrarian historical study.

KEYWORDS Bernard Samuel Gilbert, Lincolnshire, countryside, early twentieth century, rural literature, 1914

Introduction

Mary looked now at the Wolds to the north, now at the sunset in the west until gradually the latter absorbed her attention. It was one of those superb sites that only the Fenland can offer and which, one day, long after Mary lay with her ancestors, a genius should picture for the world's delight. But not all the master painters together could show a tithe of this glory. In the foreground the masses of cloud, cumulus, piled up alps, were shot with light and shadow into rippling waves . . . All the colours of Paradise were there, and for some solitary fenman in his punt, or some forlorn maiden by a dyke side.¹

Thus wrote Bernard Samuel Gilbert in one of his earliest publications, *Tattershall Castle*, of 1913. The passage includes some of the diverse themes that characterise his literary work, most noticeably here, his celebration of landscape, regional identity and rural life. His contribution to the wider body

1. Bernard Gilbert, *Tattershall Castle: A Novel* (Horncastle, 1913), 282-3.

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of culturally influential ruralist literature of the early twentieth century is diverse and rich, but it has escaped due attention. This is a study of the first phase of his literary output.² The research identifies a series of titles by Gilbert listed in various publishers' notes appearing in the opening and closing pages of his publications. Closer reading and analysis of the texts themselves is confined here to those works to be found in the most extensive public collection of Gilbert's literature, the library and archive repositories of his home county, Lincolnshire. The value of Gilbert's writings is in their breadth, imagination and insight. His writing includes objective, empirical observation, as well as more passionate and radical views. Gilbert was also a skilful crafter of fictional prose. A brief biographical note, contained in one of the few later twentieth-century reissues of Gilbert's literary work, considers the legacy of his plays, novels and poems:

All have been long and unjustly neglected . . . He presents a deeply sympathetic but quite unsentimental view of rural life . . . Gilbert's work, like that of any other artist concerned with realities, is additionally valuable for the light that it sheds upon his milieu and period, in this case the agricultural community during the First World War and the years immediately preceding and following it.³

It is perhaps surprising that Gilbert's output has not found more substantive and prominent recognition in the present. One review of his work appeared in the *Clarion* mid-way through the First World War. The article went as far as declaring that Gilbert was 'perhaps the most English writer we possess'. The reviewer continued:

Yes, Bernard Gilbert catches the spirit of those who live close to Mother Earth, and is the best man in his line I have yet encountered. He sings the praise of sturdy men, of home-brewed ale, old customs, farmhouse fare, modern methods of cultivation, and honest people. And best of all he is a great democrat, on the side of the people all the time.⁴

2. For a narrower and more selective analysis focusing on Gilbert's letters to the *Lincolnshire Echo* on the city of Lincoln during 1914, see: Andrew J. H. Jackson, 'Civic Identity, Municipal Governance and Provincial Newspapers: The Lincoln of Bernard Gilbert, Poet, Critic and "Booster", 1914', *Urban History*, 42/1 (2015), 113-29.
3. Patrick O'Shaughnessy (ed.) *Lincoln Fair and Other Dialect Poems* (Boston, 1986), 4-5.
4. E. Wharrier-Soulsby, 'Bernard Gilbert: The Poet of the Country Folk', *Clarion*. This undated review article appears as an end page in Bernard Gilbert, *War Workers and Other Verses* (London, 1916), 66. The *Clarion* was founded by the socialist John Blatchford as a Manchester-based weekly periodical in 1891, publishing primarily fiction. The *Clarion* became very popular, achieving an impressive circulation. The publication would encourage the formation of working-class clubs and societies and develop connections with the emerging Labour Party. See: Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside Since 1900* (London, 2003), 25-6; Vincent

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Just over ten years later Gilbert was dead. His obituary in the *Lincolnshire Chronicle* would emphasise his significance as a creative writer and social observer:

He was a literary artist who dedicated his life to the presentation of the Lincolnshire scenes and people whom he knew and loved so well and determined to the imagination of future generations. He believed that here, in the isolated country of the wolds and fens, were the only real survivors of the Old England rapidly disappearing, and he worked with patience and thoroughness altogether incredible to all but the few who knew his methods, to picture the life of our villages before it changed and finally disappeared.⁵

Gilbert died on 8 May 1927 at the age of 45. He has been proclaimed to be: 'the finest poet to have written in the Lincolnshire dialect since Tennyson . . . and, like Tennyson . . . [possessed] a sharp eye for character'.⁶ However, Tennyson's reputation rather overshadows that of Gilbert today. Gilbert was most active in the years between 1911 and 1914, and in the early 1920s. His output slowed in between these phases, during a period of engagement in war work in London. The study here considers the writing that emerged in the early phase before the outbreak of the First World War, while he was still residing in his home county. The research aims to draw the attention of historians to his literary work as a primary source, and to the various social, economic, political and cultural themes that are present within it.

Published information on the life of Bernard Gilbert is quite limited. However, an account can be pieced together from obituaries, publishers' notes, reviews, editorials and a number of standard primary sources.⁷ Gilbert was born in 1882 in Billingham, a small fenland-edge village to the south of

Geoghegan, 'Socialism and Christianity in Edwardian Britain', *Utopian Studies*, 10/2 (1999), 45-7; Deborah Mutch, 'Re-Righting the Past: Socialist Historical Narrative and the Road to the New Life', *Literature and History*, 18/1 (2009), 16-34.

5. Lincoln Central Library, UP7883, W. E. G. R., 'Death of a Lincolnshire Novelist. Mr. Bernard Gilbert – A Writer Who Depicted Lincolnshire for Future Generations', typescript, from *The Lincolnshire Chronicle* 14 May 1927, 2. A much-abridged version of this appreciation is reproduced as an 'Obituary', in Maurice B. Hodson (ed.) *Living Lincoln by Bernard Gilbert* (Lincoln, 1983) 4.
6. O'Shaughnessy, 'Introduction', 4. Alfred Tennyson, also Lincolnshire born, enjoyed a much longer life, 1809-92. In addition he was appointed to the position of Poet Laureate in 1850, succeeding Wordsworth, and, in 1884, given a Barony.
7. Kelly's Directories, *Kelly's Directory of Lincolnshire* (London, 1905), 62; Kelly's, *Kelly's Directory* (London, 1913), 70; Christine Stockwell, 'Introduction', in Gilbert, *John of the Fens: A Story of Stuart Times* (Heighington,

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Lincoln. His education, however, would take him to a private school in Cambridge. He would return to Billingham subsequently, becoming the Principal of the firm of A. C. Gilbert & Son, seed and potato merchants, a business founded in the village by his father. Gilbert married in 1910, at the age of 28. Shortly afterwards, thirty years into his life, he would take the decision to turn to professional writing. Within a few years he had moved to the nearby market town of Woodhall Spa, then Lincoln, and finally London.

Gilbert's first book was a collection of verse, produced by a Lincolnshire publishing firm in 1911. The work, *Lincolnshire Lays*, contains 23 poems on life in the Lincolnshire countryside, and 21 further verses relating to a range of other historical, biographical, topographical, romantic and imaginary themes and subjects. In the following year, a metropolitan publisher, Frank Palmer, would put into print a very different work, *Fortunes for Farmers*. The work was one of social and political commentary and dedicated to the National Farmers' Union. Through 1912 and 1913 Gilbert would publish three plays. All of the scripts satirise and stereotype class relations and rural culture. In 1913, working in a different genre again, Gilbert published *Tattershall Castle*. The work, a historical novel, was produced by a regional publisher. The novel has some basis in fact: the circumstances leading up to the victory of the parliamentarians under Oliver Cromwell at the battle of Winceby on 11 October 1643, and the subsequent expulsion of the Royalists from Lincolnshire.⁸ In 1913 Gilbert would also start publishing what would amount to a series of six political pamphlets on rural and agricultural topics. Just prior to the outbreak of the First World War Gilbert took up residence in Lincoln. For six months from early 1914 he would become a correspondent for the *Lincolnshire Echo*, writing a series of 19 articles for the newspaper. Their content and the popular interest generated would prompt the *Echo* to publish them in a single volume, *Living Lincoln* in 1914. In the same year Frank Palmer would publish Gilbert's second book of verse, *Farming Lays*, containing 25 poems. Unlike his first volume of poetry, there are no 'other verses'. The focus is entirely on the rural scene. Moreover, it is also evident that this was to a large extent a work of republication, probably aiming at a new and wider market, for 14 of the *Farming Lays* had already appeared in the locally-produced *Lincolnshire Lays* of 1911. The publisher's note in *Farming Lays* emphasises the significance of Gilbert's verses and presents the case for bringing them to broader attention:

1990), 5; 'Obituary', in Hodson, *Living Lincoln*; O'Shaughnessy, 'Introduction'; W. E. G. R., 'Death of a Lincolnshire Novelist'; John Redfearn Williamson, *Bernard Gilbert: Dialect Poet* (London, 1915).

8. Stockwell, 'Introduction', 5.

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Farming life and the close tussle with Mother Earth has never wholly lacked its singers, but they have too often been obliged to doff smock and leggings and make their genteel bow in order to find the ear of the bigger world . . . But the author of these Farming Lays has struck another and a fresh note, he is authentic; he sees and depicts from inside the humours, the exasperations, the simplicities, the troubles of the man who scratches the earth for his livelihood.⁹

Later in 1914, Gilbert also published another novel, *What Shall It Profit?* It appears that this may have been his last publication of 1914, for an introductory page to the volume lists the other works by Gilbert known to have been published in the same year, including *Living Lincoln* and *Farming Lays*.¹⁰ In the novel Gilbert begins with a note that 'The characters in this novel, and the village of Markham, are purely imaginary', but, giving away his inspiration, adds: 'both village farmers and characters are familiar to the Fens of Lincolnshire'.¹¹

The work that Gilbert had produced over a period of four years attracted a substantive critical appreciation by John Redfearn Williamson in the *Manchester Quarterly* in 1915. Williamson praised 'the stirring narrative' of *Tattershall Castle* and the qualities of his dialect plays. He wrote of Gilbert's first play, 'Their Father's Will': 'The characters are natural, the dialogue is unforced and free from fine phrasing, and out of home-spun material the author has woven an authentic bit of rural life, a web of enduring stuff'.¹² For Williamson, however, the quality of Gilbert's dialect verse stands out. Moreover, Gilbert's craft was a reminder of the importance of the genre:

A genuine dialect is a survival, a relic of age-long mutations, a repository of antique words and phrases . . . Its very crudities are musical and eloquent to native ears, and how much we should have lost if folk speech had been

9. Gilbert, *Farming Lays by Bernard Gilbert* (London, 1914), 7.
10. Gilbert, *What Shall It Profit? A Novel* (London, 1914), 2. The list also gives the name of another, earlier novel not held in the Lincolnshire collections examined: *Yellow Flag*.
11. Gilbert, *What Shall It Profit?*, 4.
12. Williamson, *Bernard Gilbert*, 84-5. This review is a reprint of a version originally appearing in the *Manchester Quarterly: A Journal of Literature and Art*, a periodical published by the Manchester Literary Club. The reprint was produced by the firm acting as the publishing agent for the Literary Club, Sherratt and Hughes. Williamson was a member of the Club and a contributor to its papers, including the *Quarterly*. The association had been established in 1862, with Lancashire dialect poets among its founding members. The support for vernacular verse would form a primary interest of the Club. Margaret Beetham, 'Ben Brierley's Journal', *Manchester Region History Review*, 17/2 (2006), 76-7; Michael Powell and Terry Wyke, 'Charting the Manchester Tributary of the Golden Stream: Leary's History of the Manchester Periodical Press', *Manchester Region History Review*, 17/2 (2006), 43, 54; John H. Swann, *Manchester Literary Club: Some Notes on Its History 1862-1908; With Reminiscences of the Christmas Suppers by John Mortimer* (Manchester, 1908).

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suppressed, and broad provincialisms excommunicated. But the skill to unlock the soul of a people with the key to its own dialect is an attribute given to few . . . Among the benefactors who deserve more than a passing glance the name of a newcomer, Bernard Gilbert, should certainly be included.¹³

The output of Gilbert in the few years up to 1914, and more broadly across his fifteen-year writing 'career', offers much that ought to be of interest to historians of the early twentieth-century countryside. His activity was short lived, but it was prolific. Moreover, the richness of Gilbert's legacy is an outcome of the range of his work, with its contributions to a number of literary genres. Various themes are evident in his literature. Gilbert's writing evoked the physical and cultural character of the landscapes of Lincolnshire, together with those more generically framed. In his fictional work, particularly character studies, he depicted evocatively, sensitively and critically rural life, including the character of class and labour relations. In addition, the state of the countryside was clearly among the more prominent of Gilbert's concerns, and related issues of reform and improvement. The breadth of Gilbert's literary legacy calls for a correspondingly broad-ranging analytical approach. Reference can be made to the work of regional, rural and agrarian historians, historical and cultural geographers, and scholars of English literature who have studied texts such as those written by Gilbert. Some editors' notes and reviews indicate how Gilbert might be placed in relationship to various literary traditions and their leading practitioners, while Gilbert himself sometimes makes clear his position and motivation.

Culture, landscape and regional identity

Assistance in analysing Gilbert's work can be found by turning, first, to the historiography of the regional fictional literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This genre has proved to be a rewarding primary source for supporting interdisciplinary investigations of changing ideas of regions and regionalism. In this creative literature the region is variously depicted.¹⁴ It is a provincial

13. Williamson, *Bernard Gilbert*, 66-7, 71.

14. Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge, 2003) 121-4; R. A. Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales', in R. A. Dodgshon and R. A. Butlin (eds) *An Historical Geography of England and Wales* (London, 1990), 246-50; G. E. Cherry and J. Sheail, 'The Dynamics of Change', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England & Wales, VII* (Cambridge, 2000), 1590-1; A. J. H. Jackson, "'The Serious Historian of the Village': Rural Tradition and Change as Recorded by Henry Williamson", *The Devon Historian*, 53 (1996), 11-15; Louis James, 'Landscape in Victorian Literature', in G. E. Mingay (ed.) *The Rural Idyll* (London, 1989), 69-70; W. J. Keith, *Regions of the Imagination: The Development of British Rural Fiction* (Toronto, 1988); John Kirk,

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'other', a sphere that is different from, and a contrast to, the metropolitan centre. Regions are portrayed as distinctive, as expressed in landscape characteristics, human practices and cultural values. They can be, at least in some places, resilient, that is, resisting homogenising, generalising, industrialising, urbanising and modernising forces; or, in other places, diminishing and retreating in the face of such pressures. A region can hold political power and administrative authority, or can have them taken away. Regions are represented in this fiction as intertwined with notions of rurality and tradition, and a certain ideal of what Englishness constitutes. They are, in addition: being 'opened up', made more accessible by transport systems, and appreciated more broadly through leisure, tourism and promotional activities; reproduced in forms of artistic and literary media; picturesque, attracting aesthetic appreciation; and places cultivating sentimental attachment. Regions are also presented as being vulnerable, and, as a consequence, are to be cherished. The regional literature both reflected, and was an active agent in forming, such perceptions. This body of regional-novel writing is diverse and it evolved; no single agenda or clear set of aims were subscribed to by its many contributors. Authors drew in differing, and not always consistent, ways upon this wide array of motivations in their representations of regions.

Bernard Gilbert's work demonstrates many of the features of regional creative writing. Much of his literature is in dialect verse. Popular interest in this medium was especially strong in northern counties, and in particular in Lancashire and Yorkshire. However, that interest existed in a rather paradoxical context.¹⁵ On the one hand, the availability of local newspapers and other cheap print media, together with rising literacy levels, were increasing the demand for regional dialect writing. This literature gave a compelling and authentic voice to a working class seeking to express and assert itself against a background of change. On the other hand, school education was expanding and was not amenable towards the perpetuation of dialect tongue. Thus, dialect writing found itself being

'Figuring The Landscape: Writing the Topographies of Community and Place', *Literature & History*, 15/1 (2006), 1-17; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973), 197-214.

15. G. L. Brook, *English Dialects* (London, 1963), 194-5; Andrew Hobbs, 'Five Million Poems, or the Local Press as Poetry Publisher, 1800-1900', *Victorian Periodical Review*, 45/4 (2012), 488-92; Brian Hollingworth (ed.) *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, 1977), 1-7; Howkins, 'Social, Cultural and Domestic Life', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 1399-444; Ripon, Marquis, 'Inaugural Address', *Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society*, 1 (1898), in Arnold Kellett and Ian Dewhurst (eds) *A Century of Yorkshire Dialect: Selections from the Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society* (Otley, 1997), 1-3. Percy Aldridge Grainger, the composer, made many early mechanical recordings of Lincolnshire folk songs during the decade prior to the First World War, including those in dialect; for example: O'Shaughnessy (ed.) *Twenty-One Lincolnshire Folk-Songs from the Manuscript Collection of Percy Granger* (London, 1968).

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distanced from the class for whom it was intended to serve. It became increasingly associated with seeking to save that which would be lost, that is, evolving into an antiquarian quest rather than a contemporary and creative pursuit. Dialect recording took its place in a broader middle-class movement setting out to preserve and revive folk song, dance, dress and other artistic customs. Gilbert was a latecomer to the dialect poetry genre of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Nonetheless, Gilbert's sincerity, creativity and sensitivity were appreciated. Indeed, by 1915, the reviewer John Redfearn Williamson was able to endow him with the title of 'laureate of the Fens'.¹⁶

Gilbert also employed the historical novel as a device for promoting the character and values of regional landscapes and societies. Such an approach is to be found in the literature of other regional writers, such as Sir Walter Scott, Sheila Kaye-Smith, R. D. Blackmore and Hugh Walpole.¹⁷ Gilbert's preferred region was Lincolnshire and more specifically its sub-region of fenland, a place of familial and occupational associations. A section of the novel, *Tattershall Castle* (1913), set in the seventeenth century, conveys knowledge of fenland history and customs, and also cultivates nostalgic and romantic sentiment:

Around the fire in a wide semicircle sat the village elders, gathered as they had gathered for perhaps a thousand years . . . all of old Billingham families, and nearly all related. Fen villages, like Pacific Islands, welcomed no strangers, intermarrying continually, and it spoke much for their vigour that they were so fine a race. All were fishermen, more or less; most of them grazed cattle, sheep or geese, on the rich but treacherous summer pastures; some might be called farmers, perhaps, but all fowled and fished . . . All were at home on stilts, or in a punt, and all could be depended upon to look straight down a gun-barrel.¹⁸

Tattershall Castle was republished by Oxford University Press in 1924 as *John of the Fens*. The differences between the 1913 and 1924 editions are quite noticeable. The Oxford version is evidently aimed at a market that would include school children, for it contains plates reproducing watercolour illustrations of dramatic moments within the novel's English-Civil-War narrative. The 1913 edition, meanwhile, appears to be directed at a local market, or, perhaps more ambitiously, it is a regional novel intending to bring the qualities of the Lincolnshire landscape and spirit to wider attention. The illustrations produced for this original version are a series of topographical photographic plates depicting views and prominent historic buildings in the county.

16. Williamson, *Bernard Gilbert*, 72.

17. Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, 78-9, 116, 174.

18. Gilbert, *Tattershall Castle*, 8.

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Gilbert's evocation of landscape, region and cultural distinctiveness is also much in evidence in the other literary genres in which he worked. In *Tattershall Castle* the book opens with one of his early poems, 'Lincolnshire'. The final verse incorporates many of the emphases customarily imbedded in regional literature: topographical uniqueness, sentimental connection, the rural, rather than the urban or metropolitan, a sense of tradition, and resistance to change. As the poem concludes:

We love thee, Lincolnshire, our mother thou,
We worship thee whilst following the plough.
We need no cities' fame nor glittering strand,
Nor wealth seek we;
Only thy level Fen and gentle Wolds.
Our fathers' graves thy memory enfolds,
For life and death our fate thy bosom holds
Content with thee,
Who hold'st us in the hollow of one hand,
The other barring with an iron hand
The eternal sea.¹⁹

Rural life

Regional literature has much in common with another, contemporaneous body of fictional, semi- and non-fictional work on rural life and landscape. Rural writing, as expressed variously in novels, poetry, essays and journals, also became well established in the nineteenth century and retained its popularity into the twentieth. This, too, has formed the basis of an interdisciplinary historiography exploring evolving constructions of, and discourses relating to, the countryside - both real and imagined. The two conjoined genres, the rural and the regional, share themes and authors, but also exhibit some differences in attention and emphasis.²⁰ In the rural literature there is to be discerned an

19. The poem features on an unnumbered, preliminary page in *Tattershall Castle*.

20. Michael Bunce, 'Reproducing Rural Idylls', in Paul Cloke (ed.) *Country Visions* (Harlow, 2003), 15-9; Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Change and Social Change Since 1800* (London, 2002), 25-34; Burchardt, 'Rethinking the Rural Idyll: The English Rural Community Movement', *Cultural and Social History*, 8/1 (2011), 74-6; Mark Freeman, 'The Agricultural Labourer and the "Hodge" Stereotype, c. 1850-1914', *Agricultural History Review*, 49/2 (2001), 172-86; Jackson, 'Local and Regional History as Heritage: Conceptualising the Purpose and Practice of Local Historians', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14/4 (2008), 366-8, 372-3; Jackson, "'The Serious Historian'"; James, 'Landscape'; Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, 173-77; David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), 38-42; Williams, *The Country and the City*.

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appreciation of regional distinctiveness, and an awareness of it being opened up. Equally, the countryside could be an environment perceived pessimistically as succumbing to progress and the impact of the modern. Indeed the same literature often provided a vehicle for protest, with contributors objecting to unacceptable living and working conditions and harmful economic change. In addition, writing on the rural articulated a wide range of moral themes, with the countryside embodying numerous positive values and associations: stability, security, simplicity, community, the small scale, purity, the natural, the picturesque, virility, continuity, tradition, order, and a nostalgic form of Englishness. Nature and its relationship with 'man' feature large; with nature elevated or feared, considered beautiful or harsh, or viewed as harmonising with, or alienated from, the human experience. Life in the countryside could be romanticised, sentimentalised and idealised; empathised with in attempts to record social and cultural details or to expose realities and truths; or subjected to objective empirical and scientific enquiry. Literary representations of the countryside also observed the presence of critical influences and forces: it was a product of the nature of the soil and of farming practices, and was also an outcome of landownership and power relations. Furthermore, the rural was compared with, and often depicted as an escape from, the urban. Rural writers contrasted considerably in the ways in which they crafted together particular combinations of these various and diverse approaches and interpretations.

Gilbert endeavoured to capture historical and contemporary details and realities in his literature on the countryside, alongside evolving more romantic, picturesque and imaginary dimensions. As Gilbert was writing, leading English poets of the 'Georgian' movement, or, more specifically, the Dymock (Gloucestershire) circle, were contributing to a new output of ruralist and other verse. The poems of prominent members of this set, such as Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas, ranged from the idealising and romanticising, to the more honest and observant. Gilbert's poetry also incorporated such approaches; however, it his work with dialect that ensures that he stands aside from the Georgians. Passages in vernacular prose could underpin satirical representations, but also lend authenticity to his writing. In these objectives his efforts were akin to those of other, earlier writers as well as contemporaries, for example: John Clare, William Barnes and Henry Williamson. Moreover, he echoed central themes in the writings of celebrated Lancashire and Yorkshire dialect poets, notably the representation of corporately held working-class sentiment, the hankering after homeliness and simplicity, and the dignity and humour of those living and labouring in adversity.²¹

21. Beetham, 'Ben Brierley's Journal', 80-2; Brook, *English Dialects*, 194-5; Hollingworth, *Songs of the People*, 6-7; Jackson, "'The Serious Historian'", 11-3; James, 'Landscape', 67-9; Keith, *The Poetry of Nature: Rural*

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Redfearn Williamson went as far as rating Gilbert's dialect verses above those of Tennyson, who also experimented with dialect. There is to be found in the work of the former a 'kindly, genial humour that laughs with men, and not at them-the humour that helps to sweeten and brighten the lot of those who lead lives of monotonous toil'. Gilbert's poetry was in 'marked contrast' to the 'mordant' verses of Tennyson.²²

In his poems Gilbert employs dialect to lend authenticity and force to some of his representations of rural life, including the harsh realities of agricultural labour and contending with nature. He commenced his second collection of verse with 'Farming – Old Style', which is the lament of a retiring farmer, recalling:

I doan't know wot it wor as brought me down –
Noabuddy duddn't; luck began to frown,
An' things went some'ow crooked altogether
Like an owd tree as couldn't stand the weather,
Wemblin' this waay, an' that, as the wind blawed,
Until, at last, you see it over-thrawed.

Gilbert, here, may be making reference to two of Tennyson's dialect poems, which characterise the self-seeking 'Northern Farmer – New Style' and the more dutiful and worthy 'Northern Farmer – Old Style'.²³

Dialect, for Gilbert, also features in bringing humour and enriching satirical representations of rural social classes. This is evident in his poetry, but also in his early plays. In each play at least one 'rustic' is featured, exercising the Lincolnshire dialect. In the case of the first script, 'Their Father's Will', this character is 'Bones'. Here, as in other plays, characters such as Bones represent values such as tradition, continuity and simplicity, challenging change, progress and the power of landowners and farmers:

Perspectives in Poetry from Wordsworth to the Present (Toronto, 1980), 39-91; F. W. Moorman, 'Some Recent Publications in the Yorkshire Dialect', *Yorkshire Dialect Society* (1914), in Kellett and Dewhurst, *A Century of Yorkshire Dialect*, 7-9; Rennie Parker, *The Georgian Poets: Abercrombie, Brooke, Drinkwater, Gibson and Thomas* (Plymouth, 1999), 1-5; Maureen Sutton, *A Lincolnshire Calendar* (Stamford, 1997), 86; V. de S. Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry, 1880-1940* (London, 1965), 130-6; Williams, *The Country and the City*, 226. 'Georgian' poetry is associated with a new body of creative work. It was established by Edward Marsh as the editor of a series of 5 volumes of anthology taking the title of *Georgian Poetry*, and published between 1912 and 1922.

22. Williamson, *Bernard Gilbert*, 71-2.

23. Gilbert, *Farming Lays*, 9-10; this is the third of the 14 verses of the poem; Brook, *English Dialects*, 196-7.

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Enter CHARLES ELMIT, in country clothes, breeches, leggings, &c . . .

Enter TOM BONES from the Yard.

Bones – (to Charles) What's this about th'owd bull goin' to the Show?

Charles – (Stands with back to fireplace) Say 'sir' when you speak to me

Bones – What for?

Charles – Because I tell you . . .

Bones – I can't wait here all day. He's not fit to go to any Shows.

Charles – He *is* going . . .

Bones – Oh, aye – I see you're goin' to do the mester now. It's all very well; but you doan't know nowt about *bulls*. I wor' tendin' to 'em afore you wor' iver thought on.²⁴

Bernard Gilbert's rural writing also dwells much on change in more melancholic terms, with much emphasis on other typical themes, those of threat, decline and loss. Again, he was in good company: Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, George Sturt and Winifred Holtby, for example, all shared such concerns.²⁵ The six-verse poem 'The Last Fen Fisherman' is especially moving. The final verse reminisces:

No more the waters roam the land,
But 'id awaay on ivery hand
Are led in channels to the sea,
Instead o' flowin' fancy free,
Instead o' roarin' fierce an' wild,
The same as when I wor a child,
They creep imprisoned an' defiled
The waters roam no more.²⁶

24. Gilbert, 'Their Father's Will' (Lincoln, 1912), 3 and 6. The other two plays of this time are: Gilbert, 'The Ruskington Poacher' (Lincoln, 1913) and 'Eldorado' (Lincoln, 1913). The three works were published together soon afterwards as *Three Dialect Plays* (Lincoln, 1915).
25. Burchardt, 'Rethinking the Rural Idyll', 75; Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales', 249-50; Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, 106-8, 155-6; Kirk, 'Figuring the Landscape', 1-6; Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, 39-40; Richard Perren, *Agriculture in Depression, 1870-1940* (Cambridge, 1995), 11-16; Williams, *The Country and the City*, 9, 197-214, 264-9.
26. Gilbert, *Lincolnshire Lays* (Horncastle, 1911), 31-3. Extensive reclamation of coastal marshland and fenland in Lincolnshire continued through the nineteenth century, as it did across Eastern countries more broadly; see: T. W. Beastall, *Agricultural Revolution in Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1978), 61-84; G. E. Cherry and John Sheail, 'The Lowlands', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 1687-9; and 'Coasts and Rivers', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 1720. This

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Gilbert wrote overwhelmingly about the rural, regional and agricultural. In his political commentary, *Fortunes for Farmers*, he drew on one of his dialect poems to form a preface, one verse reads:

Noa, let me keep my farmin',
My 'orses an' my dogs;
I'd allers be contented
W'out your shops and fogs.
I doan't care for grand houses,
An' trams wean't make me shout,
Like I does on frosty mornin's,
Afore the sun is out.²⁷

He confessed his bias towards life in the countryside, and conveyed its appeal in an article in the *Lincolnshire Echo* published in 1914: 'To the lover of wildlife, of growing things, of birds, trees, and open spaces, the country comes first'. He continued: 'to those who desire peace and meditation the village and the open fields with their clouds, their solitude and peacefulness, must come before the city'.²⁸ In much of his literature he explored relations between the city and country, and in places was markedly anti-urban. In this he had much in common with other ruralist writers.²⁹ However, he did not entirely neglect the city and some of its qualities. His 19 articles for the *Lincolnshire Echo* on the city of Lincoln through 1914 are among his best passages of contemporary observation. Provincial newspapers served many roles, including standing in accord with, or deviating from, the nature of progress and the stance of power elites; and, in terms of cultural function, were an active agent in fostering local cultures, identities and expressions.³⁰ Gilbert, through his correspondence

process brought benefits in terms of agricultural production and health, but it was not without controversy, for example in reducing commoners' rights and, where land levels fell, in increasing flooding.

27. Gilbert, *Fortunes for Farmers* (London, 1912). The poem is not attributed, but can be found as a verse within the poem 'Farming', in *Lincolnshire Lays*, 10-11. The poem is also reproduced in Gilbert, *Farming Lays*, 71-3.
28. Gilbert, 'The City Streets', in Hodson, *Living Lincoln*, 48.
29. Bunce, 'Reproducing Rural Idylls', 14-20; Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 25-34; Howkins, *The Death of Rural England*, 25-6; Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, 106-8, 155-6; Kirk, *Figuring the Landscape*, 1-6; Williams, *Country and the City*.
30. Beetham, 'John Brierley's Journal', 81-2; Andrew Hobbs, 'When the Provincial Press was the National Press c.1836-c.1900', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 13/2 (2009), 16-43; Jackson, 'Civic Identity';

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with the *Echo*, was an able contributor to these functions of the press, passing critical comment or evoking senses of local place. Gilbert's articles for the *Echo* are devoted to the city, but in a few places there is a consideration of the impact of urban change on the countryside. In a prophetic piece entitled 'The Future' he considers the rapid expansion of the city of Lincoln and the broader context of rural depopulation:

the town is magnetic enough with its amusements, companionship, and, above all the evening-life for its workers. The population . . . is flocking citywards, with accelerating speed . . . and if nothing comes to check it, the emptying of the countryside is only a matter of time. On the other hand there is a strong movement . . . 'back to the land'. People are realising that the city slums are not the best breeding ground for a sturdy race, and in the coming generation we shall see concerted attempts to stem the rural exodus.³¹

Here, as in his literature elsewhere, Gilbert draws on certain positive associations of the countryside, as being a place of purity and virility, but also points to its exposure to broader and harmful economic and urban change.

Agriculture and the state of the countryside

It is also relevant in this analysis to give some separate consideration to a form of literature that is to a great extent, if not entirely, synonymous with the regional and the rural genres. This is writing that relates more specifically to farming and agricultural improvement. Writers of regional and rural fiction often showed great concern for such matters of course. However, there can be identified a

Andrew J.H. Jackson, 'Provincial Newspapers and the Development of Local Communities: The Creation of a Seaside Resort Newspaper for Ilfracombe, Devon, 1860-1', *Family and Community History*, 13/2 (2010), 101-13; Mary Lester (2009) 'Local Newspapers and the Shaping of Local Identity in North-East London c.1885-1915', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 5, 1: 44-62; Michael Murphy, *Newspapers and Local History* (Chichester, 1991), 16, 20; Richard Olney, *Rural Society and County Government in Nineteenth-Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1979), 161; Walker, 'The Development of the Provincial Press in Britain c. 1780-1914', *Journalism Studies*, 7/3 (2006), 373-86.

31. Gilbert, 'The Future', in Hodson, *Living Lincoln*, 95-7. Gilbert proceeded in prescriptive terms, calling for the clearance of slums and, referring to the work of Seebohm Rowntree and continental approaches to town and country planning, generous suburban housing provision. For the general background, see, for example: Cherry and Sheails, 'The Dynamics of Change', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 1603-17; M. Harrison, 'Housing and Town Planning in Manchester before 1914', in A. Sutcliffe, *British Town Planning: The Formative Years* (Leicester, 1981), 110, 169; Jackson, 'Civic Identity'; S. Pepper and M. Swenarton, 'Home Front', in Swenarton, *Building the New Jerusalem: Architecture, Housing and Politics 1900-1930* (Bracknell, 2008), 15.

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large body of publications by authors with backgrounds in landowning and farming, politics, government office, philanthropy, or journalism who engaged in non-fictional and direct modes of observation, evaluation and critique. This literature has also attracted the attention of both historians and geographers.³² The agenda of the writers on agriculture included the recording and dissemination of knowledge, the promotion of progress and innovation, the cause of bringing rural regeneration and well-being, calls for state-policy intervention, and the championing of traditions and diversity. Perceptions of regions and the rural for such authors were determined by factors such as: geology, climate, land-carrying capacity, specialist-commodity production, farming culture and practice, integration into wider economic systems, population change, access to education, and susceptibility to urban and industrial encroachment. This strand of literature developed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and can be found represented in official agriculture and land-use reports, social surveys, travel journals, diaries and calendars, memoirs, newspaper correspondence, and political pamphlets.

Bernard Gilbert also made a contribution to the political and practical literature on the condition of the countryside and the health of agriculture. In fact his home county was taking something of a lead in the development of agrarian politics. He joined the county's Farmers' Union and would take the position of the association's secretary. Lincolnshire's Farmers' Union, founded in 1904, was the country's first, and it would in turn be instrumental in bringing the National Farmers' Union into being four years later. This establishment of the two unions was a reflection of the strengthening position of farmers, in particular large tenant farmers, at a time of a corresponding decline in the place of the landowners. Moreover, in the hands of the Lincolnshire Liberals the representation of the labouring interest was finding a bolder voice.³³ Gilbert's *Fortunes for Farmers*, with its

32. Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770-1980* (London, 1988), 139-42; Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 30-3; Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales', 236-9; Howkins, *The Death of Rural England*, 7-20; Cherry and Sheails, 'Summary and Reflections', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 1742-54; Keith, *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White and Other Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Toronto, 1975); Freeman, 'The Agricultural Labourer'; Nicholas Goddard, 'A Contrast in Style: An Appreciation of Two Victorian Agricultural Journalists', *Agricultural History Review*, 44/2 (1996), 180-90; Howard Newby, *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England* (London, 1987); 116-8; Williams, *The Country and the City*, 62-7, 96-107, 254-63.

33. Armstrong, *Farmworkers*, 152-3; Howkins, 'Social, Cultural and Domestic Life', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 1377-8; John R. Fisher, 'Agrarian Politics', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 343-4; Mingay, 'The Farmer', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 809; Olney, *Rural Society and County Government*, 181-2. Lincolnshire was also home to the landowner and prominent writer on agricultural affairs, Christopher Hatton Turnor; for example: *The Land and its*

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dedication to the NFU, was an encouragement of enterprise and an attempt to confront inclinations towards sloth in the farming sector. In the first chapter of *Fortunes for Farmers* Gilbert goes on to call for enterprise, improvement and self-sufficiency:

England is one enormous mouth, a huge market, and the amount . . . imported, paying freight from the other side of the world, should make us blush. We ought to be supplying our own market, not crying for Protection. The only protection of any use is the armour of our wits and the shield of our enterprise . . . Wherever the new culture has reached, the character of farmers has changed; they become wide-awake business men . . . May these parts flourish, and multiply until the foreigner ceases to insult us with his imports, until the rural population is re-established, and the countryside is smiling as it was in olden times. Here is the future, and the fortune, for all farmers who will accept it.³⁴

Gilbert combined critical observation of the contemporary agrarian scene with the campaign for reform and progress, condemning current policies and practices, while also showing much encouragement and considerable optimism. Gilbert followed with series of pamphlets. The first was an opportunity for Gilbert to extend his examination of an issue that had featured prominently in his book *Fortunes for Farmers* of the previous year, that of protection. The pamphlet, entitled *Farmers and Tariff Reform*, opened with an endorsement from the Chairman of the Lincolnshire Farmers' Union. The statement approved of Gilbert as a suitable and able advocate and representative:

I ask all those who are in any way connected with the land to read this pamphlet. Mr. Gilbert is a practical farmer. He states in a plain, unvarnished, and unbiased manner the reasons why every farmer should oppose to the best of his power the new form of Fiscal policy.³⁵

Gilbert went on to call for opposition to a new round of proposals for selective tariff reform. The measures, from the Conservative Party, reignited a longstanding controversy: the preference shown in fiscal policy making towards meeting the interests of manufacturers and the urban working

Problems (London, 1921), in Mingay, 'The Farmers', 788. Gilbert would later co-author with Turnor: *Where Are We Going: A Manifesto to All Who Live on or by the Land?* (London, 1923).

34. Gilbert, *Fortunes for Farmers*, 4-6.

35. Lincoln City Library, UP189, Gilbert, *Farmers and Tariff Reform* (London, 1913), 2. The other five pamphlets are: *What Every Farmer Wants*, *The Farm Labourer's Fix*, *The Hated Act*, *Will Redmond Ruin You?*, and *The Farmer's Choice*. Copies of these other publications are not held in the Lincolnshire repositories that were searched for this research. They are likely to have appeared in print through 1913 and 1914, for they are listed among the works already published by the author in an opening note to Gilbert's 1914 novel, *What Shall It Profit?*, 2.

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classes, and the corresponding neglect of the agricultural sector. The celebrated phase of 'high farming' of the mid-nineteenth century had given way to a number of decades of harsh exposure to international competition, unfair price-control mechanisms, and an unwillingness of governments to intervene.³⁶ Gilbert set out an analysis of the policy and surrounding debate through the pamphlet, arguing for objection to all forms of tariff reform as a general principle, rather than seeing the introduction of partial measures that would further disadvantage agriculture. In this he was in line with the broad body of landowner and farmer opinion. There was a basic empathy towards the idea of protection, but a general scepticism towards if, and how, it might be realistically and consensually imposed. Gilbert placed greater faith in the embrace of agricultural improvement:

There are no moral maxims for young men, but hard facts, and may be proved. In my immediate locality are a number of young farmers, between 25 and 35 years, who are progressing rapidly, taking more and more land, up-to-date, enterprising and ever ready to try new methods. Some were labourers ten years ago, saved a little money, took a small holding, and never looked back.³⁷

Gilbert's more objective and pragmatic commentary stands somewhat at a distance from his more tolerant and sympathetically-minded creative work. Indeed some of his critical accounts draw attention to a certain tension in his literature. At the time in which he was writing a shift was underway in ruralist writing. The stereotyping of the rural worker as the generically-titled and backward 'Hodge' was giving way to more positive constructions. The spread of literacy, democracy and unionism was empowering the rural labour force, while the merits of the country were being re-evaluated in the face of the perceived failures of the city to deliver societal advance.³⁸ Creative literature found itself caught between constructing more respectful portrayals and perpetuating the stereotypes favoured by urban consumer-driven constructions of the countryside. Gilbert's creations occupy both extremes, still playing to the market for the more traditional perceptions of rustic characters while also seeking to represent the agricultural worker in a more worthy and contemporary light. Gilbert's *Fortunes for Farmers* may have been a call to arms to the agricultural sector, but, alongside, were also poems such as 'Joshua Brent'. This captures the views towards

36. Collins 'Food Supplies and Food Policy', in Collins, *Agrarian History*, 68-71; Howkins, *The Death of Rural England*, 9-13; A. J. Marrison 'The Tariff Commission, Agricultural Protection and Food Taxes, 1903-13', *Agricultural History Review*, 34/2 (1986), 171-87; Newby, *Country Life*, 104-10; Olney, *Rural Society and County Government*, 178-85; Perren, *Agriculture in Depression*, 24-30.

37. Gilbert, *Fortunes for Farmers*, 2.

38. Freeman, 'The Agricultural Labourer'; Howkins, *The Death of Rural England*, 24-6; Newby, *Country Life*, 120-37.

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politics and progress of one agricultural labourer, and, with it, the cherishing of rural simplicity and continuity:

I doan't think much er politics,
Nor any er them knavish tricks;
They doesn't bother me a deal
As long as I can git a meal,
Wi' baccy an' a drop er gin,
I doan't care which on yer gets in.³⁹

Conclusion

Bernard Samuel Gilbert and his writing merit being rescued from obscurity. His gifts of observation, empathy and creativity are clear, and his output stands worthily alongside other contemporary rural literary work. The contents of Gilbert's publications demonstrate conformity with prevailing genres, but also convey what is singular and unique about his legacy. His various works appearing in the years between 1911 and 1914, and certain passages in particular, give indications of what he hoped to achieve in the opening phase of his literary career.

Evidently Gilbert was personally and passionately devoted to the countryside and country people, and this resonates through what is a remarkably diverse output of poetry, plays, novels, and political pamphlets through these years. His publications form an especially wide-ranging and rich articulation and evocation of the nature of rural life in this period. A great deal of Gilbert's work applies to the broad English rural scene, while much, more specifically, celebrates the Lincolnshire region. Gilbert's craft skilfully constructs various senses of regional, rural and cultural identity, with his capturing of fenland character and his use of dialect as symbol and device standing out. In addition, his publications reflect particularly well a challenge faced by other authors writing on agrarian matters before the First World War, that is, expressing and reconciling the tensions and contradictions existing between the desires to defend and idealise the countryside, and the calls to critique the realities of rural life and work and to press for remedial measures. This is a reflection of both Gilbert's personal interests and motivations, and the different readerships to which he was seeking to appeal. Thus, he expresses the contrasting and competing demands placed upon the countryside in evidence in the rural literature more widely, with the likes of continuity, purity,

39. Gilbert, *Lincolnshire Lays*, 5-6. This is the first of the eight verses of this poem.

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stability and tradition, hand-in-hand with empathetic and nostalgic associations, ranged alongside change, improvement and progress.

There is a suggestion of a parallel literary ambition to be found stated in one of the articles which he wrote for the *Lincolnshire Echo* in 1914. The piece, entitled 'Civic Pride', celebrates the new central library for Lincoln, and is a general encouragement to the citizens of the city to explore its wonders. However, it also contains an indictment of the county's literary tradition, one that clearly troubled him:

Why is it that Lincolnshire has so poor a place in the ranks of literature . . . unless we produce a native literature all will perish – our dialect will disappear, our songs, poems and tales, will be lost, and all the wit and wisdom of our peasantry be forgotten. Why is it that our county has never stimulated great artists? . . . He who would produce such literature must spring from the soil and partake of it; he must know the peasant and farmer from within. Tolstoy says that the only real art is that which appeals to the peasant . . . No one will go on producing real art without adequate appreciation, and this is the reason why there is no Thomas Hardy nor Walter Scott, no William Barnes nor Bobbie Burns, to make Lincolnshire immortal. We cannot get what we do not deserve, and since, for some reason, we do appear to have, as a county, the slightest appreciation of good writing, we shall continue to go without.⁴⁰

Readers of literature in Lincolnshire, and elsewhere, do not seem to have been any kinder to Gilbert either in the years following his death. He is not widely recognised as a literary champion, overcoming the cultural shortcomings that he associated with his home county, nor has he been held up broadly as an immortaliser - of peasants or of Lincolnshire. This study illuminates the promising possibilities that could come from bringing Gilbert to new and wider attention, and inviting further interdisciplinary investigation. As an obituary concluded:

He could justly be termed a modern Chaucer, but he has not, alas! lived to see himself as famous as the quality and scope of his work warranted . . . his fifteen years of authorship is all too brief for the fulfilment of the promise his genius held, and the task that he has set himself.⁴¹

Obituary writers, as well as reviewers and editors of Gilbert's work, have noted various reasons why his legacy has fallen into neglect, if regrettably and unjustly: his short life; the place occupied by Tennyson as Lincolnshire's leading literary figure; and the rather too specialist appeal of perhaps

40. Gilbert, 'Civic Pride', in Hodson, *Living Lincoln*, 39-41.

41. W. E. G. R., 'Death of a Lincolnshire Novelist', 1-2.

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his finest creative work, the dialect verse.⁴² Gilbert was also writing at a time when the 'Golden Age' of regional literature was drawing to a close. Its leading exponents were simultaneously articulating a regionalism in decline and under threat, and winding up the literary genre that had once flourished upon it. At the same time the writing of the regional as well as the rural was being subjected to parody.⁴³ However, these general circumstances, along with those applying more specifically to Gilbert's life and work, ought to be subject to new exploration and fresh contextualisation, rather than taken as presenting obstacles to further enquiry and progress.

It is a little over one hundred years since the emergence of Gilbert's earliest writing in print, in 1911. There is as yet no adequate work of biography, bibliographical survey or literary criticism for him. This study goes some way towards identifying and highlighting the promise that Gilbert's writing once showed, and, for historians, the potential that still persists in it today. What had drawn Gilbert's attention had also been that which had been a central concern of D. H. Lawrence: 'What does life exist in, save a vivid relationship between the man and the living universe that surrounds him?'⁴⁴ Gilbert, in exploring this theme, was, and remains, a highly creative, sensitive and observant figure; as Williamson perceived in 1915:

He knows from intimate association the vices and the virtues, the earth-bound desires, the narrow horizons, the joys and sorrows of the plodding tillers of the fields. But he does not air his knowledge like a professor, or preach, or moralise, or improve an occasion. His detachment is almost Shakespearean. He gathers his little company behind the scenes, raises the curtain, and one by one performers step on the stage.⁴⁵

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42. Stockwell, 'Introduction'; 'Obituary', in Hodson; O'Shaughnessy, 'Introduction'; W. E. G. R., 'Death of a Lincolnshire Novelist'.

43. Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales', 248-50; Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, 173-7; Williams, *The Country and the City*, 252-4.

44. In Keith, *Regions of the Imagination*, 177.

45. Williamson, *Bernard Gilbert*, 72-3.

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