

*agri culture*, Mike Ferguson (Gazebo Gravy Press)

Before Mike Ferguson became an English teacher (he's now retired), he tried his hand at farm work, imbued with the back-to-the-land enthusiasm of the 1960s and 70s counterculture. Having emigrated from the USA, Ferguson took a job for three years near Ipswich, and then lived and worked part-time in the Chiltern Hills whilst he studied at Oxford.

Although perhaps the reality of labouring, even within agriculture, hit home, and Ferguson followed his degree by training as a teacher, eventually moving to Devon, and the engaging with the Devon reading and publishing literati, especially in the context of readings, workshops and magazine & booklet production within education, Ferguson still goes slightly dewy-eyed and nostalgic about farming, as evidenced by this beautifully produced, austere pamphlet.

Much of Ferguson's current writing is process-driven: he uses erasure, pattern, word-shapes, *Humument*-type explorations and collage to write through and from writing both old and new. Here, this type of work shares its pages with more lyrical free-verse and prose poetry, and occasional haiku-esque (or imagistic) work.

There are stories here, poems full of characters and events – J. H-J. 'tending the grain dryer' but also trying to put out a barn fire with a hose in the other hand; the narrator proudly taking his heifer to the County Show but ending up flat on his arse in cowpats – but also frozen memories and moments, such as this brief, evocative and personal poem:

### **Not Shearing Sheep**

For me, it was rolling wool  
and then my lanolin arms  
wrapped around

Elsewhere, acclimatisation to the smell of silage has the effect of changing it to the 'candied whiff / of a sweet dessert; mucking out the pigs wrecks a pair of DMs; and we are asked to stand still and briefly listen to 'the heron / miscalling / our names'.

Other poems are more playful, presenting the swirl of crows or the laying of irrigation pipes by hand as simple and effective shape poems, boldly set on the page; with some evidencing the author's educational knowing and critical distance in poems such as 'Farming Without Derrida', where '[t]here is nothing to deconstruct'.

Obviously, Ferguson also has the gift of distance in time to look back at himself then. In 'Agrarian Creed' he notes that he

didn't preach  
Marx on the farm back then  
as we *were*

comrades when  
collectively hand-hoeing weeds,  
or sharing the

three-bar electric fire  
for our morning breakfast toasting,  
or freely passing on

the skills and  
wisdoms acquired over time.

and admits that even many years later, when a teacher in Devon, he would visit the Honiton (agricultural) Show – 'still drawn to / tractors' – only to find new models with air-con and stereo systems, which prompts a reimagining of possibilities, with 'Hendrix feedback up cultivated rows, / or Dylan // defiant in ignoring Maggie'. (A reference to both Thatcher and the song 'Maggie's Farm'.)

The book ends with a confessional poem and then an observational comment and statement. Having written earlier in the book that 'Hunting and gathering was / never going to be enough', 'Fault' admits the agricultural failing back then was the poet's, in an erasure poem rather appropriately sourced in Richard Jeffries' *The Toilers of the Field*:

### **Fault**

the fault of  
  
th is agricultural  
labourer  
  
is poetical feeling  
  
beauty of

The closing poem, 'Residual Revelation', is more nostalgic and accepting, although it starts by noting that

In '73 I thought this would be  
my pastoral idyll, an agrarian  
nirvana after LSD

with no need for a degree.

On some levels it clearly was an idyll, but studying literature, teaching and writing has clearly changed Ferguson, even though the poem states how he still gardens and grows crops. Although he suggests that he 'could claim / how studying, in the end, taught / [him] a thing or two', the poem ends by contradicting or qualifying this, revealing that it was

Scrivy who coached me in how to  
look and look all those years ago and  
find revelation in the simple things.

It is that sense of revelation and simplicity, an attention to the world – remembered, reinterpreted, deconstructed (or not) – that is most evident in this engaging, entertaining and clear-minded collection, which evidences an open-eyed, thoughtful and sure-footed writer at work. Even when standing in animal shit or recalling 'the butt-end of a / tedium of days'.

Rupert Loydell