

The background is a painting of an interior scene. On the left, a wooden table holds a vase with dried flowers and a small white container. A dark, textured object, possibly a book or a box, sits on the floor in the foreground. On the right, a window with a white frame looks out onto a bright, warm landscape. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones like ochre, terracotta, and sienna, with some cooler tones in the window frame and the foreground object.

**A MONTH IN  
THE COUNTRY**

**J. L. CARR**

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**INTRODUCTION BY  
MICHAEL HOLROYD**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
CLASSICS

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

JAMES LLOYD CARR was born in 1912 and attended the village school at Carlton Miniott in Yorkshire. A head teacher, publisher, and novelist, his books include *A Day in Summer* (1964); *A Season in Sinji* (1967); *The Harpole Report* (1972); *How Steeple Sinderby Wanderers Won the FA Cup* (1975); *A Month in the Country* (1980), which won the Guardian Fiction Prize and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize; *The Battle of Pollock's Crossing* (1985), also shortlisted for the Booker Prize; *What Hetty Did* (1988); and *Harpole @ Foxberrow General Publishers* (1992). He died in Northamptonshire in 1994.

MICHAEL HOLROYD is the author of acclaimed biographies of Lytton Strachey, Bernard Shaw, and Augustus John. He has also written a memoir, *Basil Street Blues*. He lives in London with his wife, the writer Margaret Drabble.

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For Kathie  
and for Sally . . . fare well

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

ONE MORNING, EARLY in the 1970s, I received a letter together with an apparently blood-soaked card. My correspondent described himself as a family butcher from Kettering. His letter read:

Although you may not have heard of the Ellerbeck Literary Award you will be pleased to hear that you have won it. The Prize is awarded at infrequent intervals and you are only its third recipient. The circumstances are that Mr. Carr who makes a living by writing is one of my customers and pays me in part with unsold works, known I understand as Remainders. These I give to better customers in lieu of my customary picture-calendars.

Mrs. Ellerbeck who goes to the WEA [Workers Educational Association] class and is not averse to a bit of literature suggested some years ago that I award one of these copies as an Encouragement to another member of the Literary World, this to be known as the Ellerbeck Prize.

We decide who it is to be from the most graphic and telling picture of the cultural world outside Kettering that we read during the month that Mr. Carr delivers his books and we settle with him. Sometimes it is a complete book that Mrs. Ellerbeck has been reading and sometimes it is only a few lines. In your case it is only a few lines but I hope someday that this will encourage you to write a book about it.

I came across these lines in some newspapers that Mr. Timpsons saves us for outer wrappings. It describes you wrestling in the dark beside a wheelbarrow of sodden volumes and cleverly inserting your signature in a book a dissatisfied customer was attempting to return to you. As a tradesman this has happened to me and I can appreciate your courage and skill.

I have removed the dust jacket for two reasons. As I store them in with my carcasses they have a slight taint and also I am told that without the jacket it will be harder to sell.

Mrs. Ellerbeck and myself intend to look for more

of your writings whenever Mr. Timpsons brings his newspapers. Meanwhile good luck to you.

Yours truly George Ellerbeck.

My prize (a nontransferable Meat Token for one pound of Best Steak) was accompanied by a novel which turned out to be a satire on the teaching profession. The whole package was a rather baffling business, but after the initial shock, I assumed the air of Sherlock Holmes and set about solving the mystery.

Three months earlier I had been invited by the London *Times* to write a comprehensive manifesto celebrating International Book Year. Contrary to my intentions, and against my better instincts, the article developed into a rich inventory of literary humiliations. If literature was thriving, as I bravely attempted to argue, then it was obviously doing so on its deathbed. It was for this work, I recognized, whose bleak comedy must have appealed to my correspondent, that I had been awarded my prize.

The book I had been sent was J. L. Carr's *The Harpole Report*. I picked it up and began reading. Two points were soon clear to me. Although it was narrated as a series of official letters, the novel appeared to be partly autobiographical. What also became clear from its wry, humorous style was that the author and my strange correspondent were one and the same person. Therefore, in my best Sherlock Holmes manner, I concluded

that my benefactor was J. L. Carr. Elementary, my dear Watson.

Readers of *A Month in the Country* will discover the Ellerbeck family under a slightly different guise. In the book's pages Mrs. Ellerbeck presides over a splendid repertory of North Riding dishes and sees to it that the new arrival at Oxgodby, the war-damaged Tom Birkin, never goes hungry. Her big, fourteen-year-old daughter Kathy, "a very organizing girl" with blue eyes and freckles, is soon coming to the village church where Tom Birkin is uncovering a large medieval wall painting, and plays gramophone records to him—sometimes she brings her wide-eyed younger brother Edgar. Head of the family is the impeccable stationmaster and formidably moustached lay preacher at the chapel, George Ellerbeck. "My father was a butcher, Mr. Birkin," he modestly reveals over Sunday lunch.

*A Month in the Country* was published seven or eight years after I received my unexpected prize, and the book's appearance was the occasion of my only meeting with J. L. Carr. It was a fleeting encounter in unusually grand surroundings. His novel had been short-listed for the Booker Prize and we came across each other, both in our dinner jackets and clasping a glass of champagne, before the dinner started. I wish we could have met in easier circumstances. His humorous face was contorted in mild agony, for he was, I judged, an intensely private man. We exchanged a few polite words, stood around

awkwardly, and agreed that the Ellerbeck Prize, though not so interesting to bank managers, was a more singular honor than the Booker Prize. Then we were herded to our separate tables. I never saw him again. But I was amused to read in his last novel, a self-published satire on the book business called *Harpole & Foxherrow, General Publishers*, that one of his characters, Mrs. Fazackerly, bookseller of Stotfield Magna, having developed the habit of stroking her books in winter, recommends as best for this kind of attention “one of Mr. Holroyd’s good solid biographies.”

J. L. Carr’s career was relentlessly unconventional. Though he was known as Jim and appears as James in one of his novels, he was actually Joseph Lloyd Carr, born in the North Riding of Yorkshire in 1912. His father was a railwayman and Methodist preacher like George Ellerbeck—indeed the Carr family appears to have had much in common with the Ellerbecks. But J. L. Carr released few details of his life to the public. On the first American edition of *A Month in the Country*, his biographical note simply reads: “J. L. Carr lives in England.”

Having twice failed his eleven-plus examination, which would have qualified him for free Grammar School entry, he was sent as a paying pupil to Castleford Secondary School (which the sculptor Henry Moore had attended), then went to the Dudley Teacher Training College, after which he taught in several schools in Birmingham. For

one improbable year he traveled to the United States and, on an exchange system, taught children on the Great Plains of South Dakota—an episode that eventually led to his novel *The Battle of Pollock's Crossing* (1985), an eccentric offshoot of David Lodge's *Changing Places*. During the Second World War, he joined the Royal Air Force and served in Sierra Leone, using some of his experiences in his novel *A Season in Sinji* (1967), where he opposes the madness of warfare with the intricate sanity of cricket (a game that, in the opinion of Bernard Shaw, had given the otherwise atheistic English nation a sense of eternity).

After the war Carr married the daughter of an Essex farmer. They had a son and in 1951 moved to Kettering in Northamptonshire, where he became a legendary headmaster. His initiatives, which enrich his novel *The Harpole Report*, were famously unorthodox. He would ask the children to put their names and addresses in bottles, then collectively launch them into the fast-flowing river; or organize an Arithmetic Race in which contestants, running along the course, were obliged to stop at various blackboards, set out across the field, and solve equations. It was not beyond him to march his pupils along the tree-lined streets of Kettering reciting A. E. Housman's "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now . . ." or hold school assembly near the railway line, or suddenly announce the school play (in which everyone participated) two days before its performance.

He would take the children to local churches to hunt for historical clues, and to a quarry so that they might search for fossils. His worst punishment was to sit a pupil near a blackboard with his crime chalked on it and beneath the school puppet Bondybunda. Unsurprisingly he was the bane of the local educational authority, though he was loved by the children and came to be respected by their parents. It was a shock for all of them when in 1967, at the age of 55, he suddenly retired to write novels.

He had already published one novel, a contrapuntal revenge melodrama called *A Day in Summer* (1964), somewhat reminiscent of Patrick Hamilton's retributive thrillers, and had saved £1,600 to buy time for writing. But this was a difficult period. In 1968 his wife was diagnosed with lung cancer and, though this intermittently went into recession, it was to kill her thirteen years later—after which Carr added to the 1991 edition of *A Month in the Country* the poignant epigraph by the Irish poet Herbert Trench.

In his charming, but not quite definitive, twenty-eight-page pamphlet *The Life and Times of J. L. Carr*, Byron Rogers writes that by 1969 Carr had only £200 left, but rescued himself by printing and selling county maps which were illumined with his teasing wit, arcane knowledge, and artistic talent. In his spare time he had taken up landscape painting, sculpture, and the recording of church architecture in various mediums ranging

from pen and wash to acrylic, varnish, "and occasionally finger" on hardboard.

Using the back room of his house in Kettering as well as a garden shed, and employing a filing system consisting of shoe boxes, he created an unusual publishing empire based, he explained, "entirely on logic." His publications measured five inches by three and a half, which enabled him to dispatch them in standard-sized envelopes at minimum postage. These "mind-enlarging micro-tomelets," as *The Times Literary Supplement* called them, consisted of sixteen tiny pages which, he claimed, was just within the public's reading span. He began with a selection of poets, the very first being John Clare, one of whose descendants he had identified as his milkman at Kettering. To these miniature poetry books he then added a bizarre collection of tiny biographical dictionaries of eponymists, usurpers, royal consorts, frontiersmen, and others. Readers came to love his wonderful mixture of fact and fantasy, his succinct and opinionated style (Nell Gwynn is a "ravishing fruiterer"; Henry VIII an "axe-happy, ulcerated, impotent monster") combined with his prolix titles, such as *Prelates, Parsons, Vergers, Wardens, Sidesmen & Preachers, Sunday School Teachers, Hermits, Ecclesiastical Flower-arrangers, Fifth Monarchy Men and False Prophets*. So successful was this publishing venture that, when approaching eighty, he decided to publish his own last two novels.

He had taken to writing books for children and continued writing novels that were generally well reviewed but never good sellers. The *London Magazine* called his fourth novel, the football fantasy *How Steeple Sinderby Wanderers Won the FA Cup* (1975) "simply the best football-based work of fiction." But, like his other books, it did not flatter people or bow to contemporary fashion. Instead, with derisive gaiety, it delivered in the words of polymath author Benny Green "some murderous blows at the fatheads who populate professional football."

In 1980, Carr published a masterpiece, *A Month in the Country*. In all his other novels, the quiriness of his talent, like Tom Birkin's facial twitching and stammering, distract the reader from his storytelling with dangling footnotes and inconsequential parentheses. But in this novel his various interests and passions seem magically harmonized and we are held, as the summer heat enfolds us, suspended between shadows from the past and premonitions of the future. It is a timeless book recreating a propitious season, another world, a place of healing. The narrative proceeds rather like Birkin's exploration of his medieval wall picture inching patiently along, following a hand or face, aiming at something that looks right. "I was engrossed in my work. It was tremendously exciting . . . I wasn't sure what I was uncovering."

Initially, as he tells us in his Foreword, Carr believed he was writing an easygoing idyll along the lines of

Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*. There are superficial similarities: both novels are rooted in English village life and have plots that revolve around the village church. Hardy mourns the passing of the old order, marked by the supplanting of the choir by a new church organ. But Carr, combining ancient and modern, gives a hilarious welcome to the new chapel organ while, in the church, he reclaims the past when Birkin finally reveals the fourteenth-century painting (Birkin's affection for the hopelessly out-of-date stove refers amusingly to Hardy's novel). Both novelists compensate for a dark pessimism with their faith in the fundamental decency of the ordinary villagers. But Hardy, for once contriving a cheery ending, has his heroine, the flighty Fancy Day, reject the parson and marry the man she loves. Carr weaves a more imaginative and ambiguous ending: "I have sometimes wondered if it was a dream."

As Tom Birkin teases the wall painting back from its years of darkness, he feels a sense of kinship with its creator. "I had lived with a very great artist, my secret sharer of the long hours I'd labored in the half-light above the arch." It is a feeling he vividly communicates to his readers: they feel a similar affinity with the novelist. *A Month in the Country* is a novel of resurrection. The nameless medieval artist had died "on the job," but his work, its color gradually spreading over the wall, is brought back to life. And Birkin, falling asleep on a tomb slab, is woken by the appearance of Alice Keach. "I

should have lifted an arm and taken her shoulder, turned her face and kissed her. It was that kind of day," he remembers long afterwards. ". . . And I did nothing and said nothing." It is a scene that recalls John Donne's early love for Ann More about which he wrote in *The Ecstasy*:

And whilst our souls negotiate there,  
We like sepulchral statues lay;  
All day the same our postures were,  
And we said nothing, all the day.

*A Month in the Country* won the Guardian prize, was reprinted many times, and, in 1987, made into a film scripted by Simon Gray with Kenneth Branagh, Colin Firth, and Natasha Richardson in the leading roles. All this popularity and success made no noticeable difference to J. L. Carr's way of life. He was an outsider, a man of integrity, who wrote from his sense of privacy.

Carr died in 1994 and his funeral service in the Kettering parish church was, in the words of Byron Rogers, "like the passing of a spymaster." He had such disparate interests that there seem to have been many J. L. Carrs, and since he compartmentalized his friendships, few of his friends knew each other. "What I remember most about his funeral service was the fidgeting . . . as the mourners kept squinting sideways to speculate about their neighbors," Rogers wrote. "Then, at the very last minute there was a clatter of high heels and

a very young, very beautiful woman came in, dressed in fashionable black. She came alone and at the end was gone, just as abruptly, into the March afternoon." No one knew her or could find out who she was—an ex-pupil, mistress, cricketer, flower-arranger, Sunday School teacher . . . But readers of *A Month in the Country* may feel that she had stepped out of its pages.

—MICHAEL HOLROYD

## FOREWORD

DURING ANY PROLONGED activity one tends to forget original intentions. But I believe that, when making a start on *A Month in the Country*, my idea was to write an easy-going story, a rural idyll along the lines of Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*. And, to establish the right tone of voice to tell such a story, I wanted its narrator to look back regretfully across forty or fifty years but, recalling a time irrecoverably lost, still feel a tug at the heart.

And I wanted it to ring true. So I set its background up in the North Riding, on the Vale of Mowbray, where my folks had lived for many generations and where, in the plow-horse and candle-to-bed age, I grew up in a household like that of the Ellerbeck family.

Novel-writing can be a cold-blooded business. One

uses whatever happens to be lying around in memory and employs it to suit one's ends. The visit to the dying girl, a first sermon, the Sunday-school treat, a day in a harvest field and much more happened between the Pennine Moors and the Yorkshire Wolds. But the church in the fields is in Northamptonshire, its churchyard in Norfolk, its vicarage London. All's grist that comes to the mill.

Then, again, during the months whilst one is writing about the past, a story is colored by what presently is happening to its writer. So, imperceptibly, the tone of voice changes, original intentions slip away. And I found myself looking through another window at a darker landscape inhabited by neither the present nor the past.

—J. L. CARR