

James Rebanks, In conversation

Racy Ghyll Farm, Cumbria 2015



James Rebanks is a hill farmer living in the northern Lake District, in the Matterdale Valley. His book 'A Shepherd's Life' was published in March 2015 and became an overnight sensation, not just in the UK, but across the world. A second book followed in late 2015 and James is now working on his third. We caught up with him on his farm just before Christmas to talk about his life as a farmer, writer and UNESCO consultant, the Lake District's World Heritage Site bid and other related things, including wilding and mole catching.

When we arrived at James' farm it wasn't raining. This was unusual for the wettest December on record, so we headed out into the fields for a photograph before sitting down to talk. We have known James for several years, during which time his life has undergone some pretty dramatic transformations – a growing family, the publication of a book, the death of his father, and the building of a house. We have seen him at sales and shows but wanted a chance to talk to him away from distractions, and find out more about his multi-faceted life as farmer, writer and consultant. We stoked up the wood burner, and settled in on the sofa, grabbing an hour of calm before the children arrived back from school with James' wife Helen, and joined us for cake.



We first met you here, in 2012, before this house had been built. A lot has changed – you now live on the land you always wanted to live on, and in just a year you have become a well known writer. So how's it going? How has this year been?

It's been good. The writing has been amazing. The biggest thing that has happened this year was losing my dad in February, so it's been the best of years, the worst of years. It's the first time in my whole life I've been the only Rebanks male making decisions on the farm.

How closely do you work with your mum?

I work really closely with my mum, particularly helping to prepare the Swaledale sheep in the autumn for the sales, doing the tonsing with the tweezers, making notes.

Being without your dad, having to make all the decisions, even though you were quite head-strong before, have there been changes in the way you farm that you might not have expected?

Yeah, my father and I had spoken for a long time about how whenever it got to a point when it was just me, we'd probably change things. My time has different economic value, so some of the things my dad would have done cos he counted his time as nothing don't make sense for me to do. We've actually made it more old fashioned. We've given up some rented land and some of the cross-bred sheep, and we're focusing on the two pure breed sheep.

Just herdwicks and swales?

Just herdwicks and swaledales, two pure flocks. We have 450 sheep going to the tup this time. About 700 sheep on the farm including followers, like gimmer hogs. We used to finish our male tup lambs and sell them fat in the spring but the margin is non-existent, you'd probably lose money, so we sold those store this autumn. The general plan is for me to have the quietest farm we've had in winter for many years, because I've got a book to write!

Have you started it yet?

Yes I have. I have a frightening amount of work to do on it before next summer. I lose lambing time and various other things I need to do, so it's getting to the slightly scary

stage where I really need to spend half a day on it every day for a couple of months. But the way the farm's set up, I can do that.

Do you have a favourite tup at the minute?

Yes, we've had probably the best autumn we've ever had. We achieved a lifetime ambition of winning the Cockermonth tup sales: champion with a Herdwick, and with a Swaledale we had first prize in C District in the small breeders, which is about as good as it gets. The sheep that my father was breeding meant quite a lot to me and my mum, and everybody knew we were doing our best to win it for him. I've invested quite a bit of money this autumn, with new tups to hopefully keep them as good as my dad had them and, in an ideal world, have them even better. 'Cos that's what you try and do if you have a flock of sheep. The idea is to try and take what my dad did in the Swaledales and put my stamp on them.

So there's a little bit of a parallel there between your style in the writing world and your style on the farm.

Yeah, they're not dissimilar things really. A flock of sheep is a bit like a piece of writing. If you tend it well, it does have your mark on it, your style.

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And it will find its way as well.

Yeah. And it can go very badly!

Before you wrote your first book, you'd written a piece in the Atlantic Magazine. Was that an important starting point?

Yeah, that led directly to me getting the book deal. Atlantic Monthly was what Ernest Hemmingway used to write for and although he was a complete twit in his personal life, I think he was one of the greatest writers ever. I thought, 'one of my heroes wrote for this magazine and I'll never get another go. Let's write something good.'

Who else has inspired you?

My favourite English nature writer is J Baker, who wrote *The Peregrine* and *The Hill of Summer*. I think he's a better nature writer than anybody else in the English Language.

I love a lot of mid-twentieth century American books, stuff like *Catcher in the Rye*, *Old Man in the Sea*. I like how simple and honest the prose is, and I like first person narrative. I have a weird relationship with books. I had one grandfather that thought reading books was a waste of time, and another who thought reading books was the best use of time in the world. I've ended up with a bit of both - reading bad books is a waste of time, but there's nothing better than reading a great book.

Most of my heroes - that's a bit of a juvenile word - but most of my heroes, they're either shepherds or writers.

Thinking about the way landscape is depicted in books and visual art, how much do you think that literature and art define a place?

I think they define it massively, but only for readers and viewers of art. Maybe ten years ago I was overestimating the effect of art and literature on this landscape – it absolutely has created a Lake District in the mind of middle class readers and artists. But I'm not sure whether that's a big part of life for most working class people, first generation immigrants who have come to, say, Manchester or Liverpool. I think if you talk to those people it hasn't dominated how they see the landscape.

In the English speaking world, the Lake District is a huge cultural thing. The minute you get into anywhere that's in Eastern Europe, Asia, South America, they're like, 'Which Lake District?' and, 'I've never heard of Wordsworth.' The further you get from home, the better the 'historic landscape' plays as a significant element, and the less important the 'Great White' writers.

Two thirds of the people in my family don't really read books. A breakthrough for me when I was in my twenties was to realise that there are amazing historians and writers who look at people like that in other landscapes and take their non-literary culture seriously.

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It looks to me like there are at least two cultures in the Lake District: there is the one that everyone's known about and read about for ages, and then there's the other one that's on the farms, at Broughton Tup Sales and all the other things that you two have spent the last four years learning about and being involved in.

To me, it seems like the most obvious thing in the world that you would try to write a book that tries to put these things across. And if you do that, you hope that a lot of people will read it, and it genuinely does stimulate them to think that this landscape isn't just Wordsworth, isn't just Wainwright, that there is other stuff.

When did you first have the inkling to write a book?

When I was about 17 or 18, when I really fell in love with good books for the first time. I read a book by W H Hudson called *A Shepherd's Life*, about a shepherd in Wiltshire in about 1890, 1900. My first thought was that somebody must have written a book like this about the Lake District farmers. I spent the next fifteen years trying to find it, and then realising that nobody had written the book that I wanted to read. I thought, well, I'll have a go at that. Some of what is in the book was actually written 20 years ago. And I started writing poems when I met Helen, and was trying to find a voice.

I have a feeling I might know the answer to this, but I'm going to ask you anyway. What's your special somewhere?

Yeah well you do know the answer! The special somewhere for me is here. It was my grandfather's farm and my dad's farm, and every little bit of it is them.

My dad would have said he was a lot more practical than I was, and better at hanging gates (I would've said I was better at breeding sheep, but hey, that's the competition

between fathers and sons). So Dad went round the farm – and this was with six weeks to live – and he took my son Isaac. They went round putting new fastenings on the gates and hanging them. Now Isaac, who's only three, will say, 'That's me and Grandad's gate, Grandad told me he was going to do that because you wouldn't know how to do that.'

I'll have myself crying in a minute! Dad's in this landscape, he's in the things that we do.

I wouldn't be heart broken if I never left this valley again. I do get other things from outside this valley, practical things like books and ideas and stuff. We're very lucky – I mean I can live my grandfather's life with books, with internet, with films.

I wanted to talk about the Lake District's bid to become a World Heritage Site. What has your involvement been in this?

I sit on the Technical Advisory Group. There are about thirty organisations in the partnership – the National Trust, the Wordsworth Trust, the Lakeland Arts Trust – anybody who's anybody as an organisation in Cumbria is part of that. I became curious about it when discussions started about ten years ago. People like Geoff Brown, who at that time was the secretary of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders' Association, were trying to persuade others that what was really significant about the Lake District wasn't its famous dead white men, but its indigenous, ancient farming system.

At the time I was working for UNESCO in some of the world's most amazing historic farmed landscapes. Maybe nobody else in the room had seen some of the things I'd seen, or knew how to articulate how important our farmed landscape might be. So I've been trying to get that across: the idea that a farmed landscape might be of global significance.

I remember having a meeting with someone in the National Park Authority and they started pulling books off their shelves: Wainwright, Wordsworth and others, and then they pulled off Geoff Brown's book about Herdwicks and said, 'Are you seriously telling me that is as important as all this stuff? Look how big the pile of books is here.' I held my own. I said, 'Yes that's absolutely what I'm telling you. It doesn't matter a damn if there's a thousand books in that pile, and only one in this. That is, I believe, one of its most significant and valuable attributes.'

One of the things we found when Land Keepers showed in London was that people from different parts of the world identified with the Cumbrian issues. People, from India, from Russia, China, they said you could change the names but the issues remain the same.

I think that is the bigger picture, yes. There was a time sixty, seventy years ago, when Beatrix Potter and others valued what we were in our own right, as a counterpoint to industry in Lancashire. Then there's a bit in the middle where everybody took it for granted, or thought it had disappeared. Now all around the world people are looking at traditional communities and why they matter. Over the last five years there's been a rediscovery of the traditional Lake District and why that matters. I've seen how difficult that is for people to understand if they have a 1949 mind-set about the national park as a place of escape and adventure, or they think

all the traditional farming has gone 'cos the farmers just look like them. It's quite a difficult thing to get your head round, that there's a farming system and it's three, or four, or five thousand years old in its fundamentals.

Now that your book's been out since April, have you noticed a change in the way other people listen to or understand the farming community here, or approach the Lake District even?

It's hard to judge. Maybe you need more time but I do get loads of messages on Twitter, or emails, or letters, from people saying that it has changed the way they look at the Lake District - they've been coming here all their life and had a sort of 'Wainwrighty' view of it, and now see it has other layers to it, and they're really interested in it.

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How have other farmers perceived your work?

About half of them probably couldn't care less, 'cos they don't read a lot of books! The other half, I've had lovely feedback. It took a while, so for the first few months most of my farmer friends came to tell me that they'd got it. Then they would smile and say, 'but I haven't read it!'

I tried very hard in the book not to big myself up. I've tried to be modest about my role and not take the limelight off them - I've tried to put it on them. I think they respect that, so, my guess, or my family's guess, is that they're proud that one of their own has told a story that is like their own. I get mercilessly teased about being famous but the thing that helps me enormously is that if I bred terrible sheep and I was a lousy shepherd, I'd be the guy that's useless that writes books. But if I can hold my own, and even beat them, with my sheep, then I'm given some credibility. So it helped very much that I was able to win Cockermouth tup sale this year!

You do have the loudest voice at the minute. Do you feel it is a responsibility - that so many people are learning about shepherding through what you're writing? What does that feel like?

There were two things I was terrified about when I started writing. One was that I was putting my family in the limelight when they didn't want it. So it was a huge relief to find out that my dad, before he died, read it, and he liked how he was portrayed and what it was about. The other fear I had was that I would upset or not represent fairly the farming community, which after all are the people I admire most in the world. It's been really nice to find that that isn't the case.

I wonder if going away has enabled you to reflect more on life here, if this has given you the tools and the perspective perhaps to tackle the subject better.

Helen'd been the first to say that you learn to articulate things better by contact with other people and other places, but the actual core voice in the book is the voice that has always been in my head. It was in my head when I was seventeen and first dreamt of writing the book. I think the slightly chippy, aggravated voice in the book that people are laughing at, that's just who I always was.

Moving away from the book, it's ten days since Storm Desmond and the devastating floods in Cumbria. Thinking about environmental policies and stewardship schemes, where is the balance between, say, planting trees, and sustaining farming through having sufficient grazing in the uplands, and what would you say about 'wilding'?

I would judge the solutions in any different landscape on a site-by-site basis. I am, sincerely, not against wilding – if the farming's not particularly historic, if the local community needs new sources of income, if they want it to be wilder. In Scotland, I think the obvious solution there is that you plant trees. The Lake District is such a small, culturally and historically unique system, so I wouldn't automatically agree that you should plant more trees, above and beyond what's been planted so far. In

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the last five years I'm told that we've planted more trees in the Lake District than anyone can remember being planted, certainly for a hundred years or more. There's been something like a fifty percent growth. I have planted on my own farm – six hundred trees – which isn't a huge amount, but on a small farm it's a start.

I think there are quite a lot of places in the Lake District where you can plant trees and you can improve biodiversity, but I think the stake holders are so fixated on planting trees that they've kind of missed the point: that isn't the most important thing about the Lake District. The World Heritage process of trying to work out the area's 'Outstanding Universal Values' went on for about fifteen years. The conclusion was that the Lake District is isn't one of the world's great natural landscapes, it's probably - and we'll find out in 2017 - one of the world's great farmed landscapes, cultural landscapes.

To my mind, that should be your starting point. How do you sustain the cultural system? How do you sustain the flocks? How do you sustain the small farms? You'd say, now having sustained that, how can we fit more biodiversity around that in a way that doesn't damage it? Planting trees would be something two, three, four steps down the way. I think the National Park Authority, for example, is so fixated on making it more biodiverse and having trees, they're kind of missing the first three steps.

I don't look at a treeless Lake District common and regret that it doesn't have lots of trees. I look at it as an integral part of a cultural and political landscape. Because the commons are deeply political. They stand for political values I believe in: people owning part of their landscape and managing it collectively. Those are things I think really matter in the modern world.

If you're caring about that, if you're putting public funds into it, I think it's quite reasonable two or three steps down the way to say, what can we do to make it more biodiverse? That rocky slope with only two sheep on it, can we fence that mountainside off and have a forest? Does that fit in with the way that we gather? I think somebody reasonable who started from that perspective could find all sorts of places we could make more wild.

It comes again to communication, and people talking and listening to one another.

You see a divide in national parks around the world. Half have some sort of indigenous community and the authorities interact with local people with respect, they champion their culture, they're proud. The other half are hopeless at caring about it and representing it. I sound like I'm ranting but I just think the organisations that matter here are full of people who don't care about the things that I care about.

But if you're still part of these conversations, you're continuing to have a voice.

I confess this year I've been a very quiet voice because I've just been too busy to help with the World Heritage Bid very much. The good news about the bid is that it does enshrine the things that I care about: a cultural landscape, a farmed landscape, with historic systems that need to be managed and cared for.

What benefit do you think it will bring if it goes ahead?

Done badly, none at all. Done well, the benefits are – think of places like Cinque Terre in Italy – you make it priority to sustain the historic farmed landscape and then you go out and do the things you need to to add value to it, to get young people into it, to promote the food products. The status would add extra marketing sparkle – so we can not just say this is a 'good' landscape but 'ours is one of the world's great landscapes: come here and invest, create jobs.'

When you look at the OECD (Organisation of Economic Corporation and Development) statistics, cultural tourists spend about twice as much as nature tourists. Cultural tourists stay longer, spend more money, are more interested in a meaningful relationship with the place. The brand value of being a World Heritage site is growing exponentially. Evidence suggests that people are now picking their holidays off the World Heritage list, so they'll pick the Lake District rather than the Yorkshire Dales, because the brand tells them that a hundred and ninety countries decided that it was actually the most special national park in the UK.

There's a whole bunch of arguments but another one is, if we're going to be partly reliant on public funds in the future, as we are now, then being able to argue that your farmed landscape is of such public benefit that it is a World Heritage Site enables you to be in a much better place to attract that money. I could carry on – but it's that kind of rationale.

We'll see what happens -

Yes, let's see. The category of cultural landscape was invented in the 1990s because UNESCO came to the Lake District when it was first proposed. They turned it down

on a nature basis and then went back and invented the category of ‘Cultural Landscape’ – of which there are now about 500 or something. They’re baffled why the Lake District hasn’t been back to claim its own category.

Coming back now to landscape and nature. I’m interested in the way that people connect to nature. Living where you do, and being on a farm, your kids are always outside and with animals, but you have a lot of school groups in as well. Do you feel there’s a growing disconnect from nature among children, and do you think that they have a sense of wonder about it?

I’m absolutely sure that all kids have a sense of wonder about it. But yes, I think the degree of disconnection from it has happened amazingly quickly, in about two generations. When the second group of kids came we let them, as an afterthought, have forty five minutes running round that field. All the teachers say that for the children that is the most amazing thing: complete freedom in a field, turning stones up and looking for frogs, just messing about. That is a million miles away from 95% of children’s life experience now. I’m not sure if that answers your question?

I suppose it’s a matter of having the opportunity to connect, or whatever it is that is stopping people from going outside as much as they used to. Probably the sense of wonder is still there, if you feed it.

I’m sure the sense of wonder’s there. I mean there’s never been more books published about nature than there are now, there’s never been more nature writers.

Although you could argue that there are more baking programmes now than there ever were, but how many more people bake? You don’t know.

That is exactly it, isn’t it, people are reading about nature more than ever, they’re seeing it on screens more than ever, but they’re not actually in it. I don’t want to be too judgemental but if people become so disconnected that they never see their food produced, they never see an animal born or die, or a crop protected or a pest killed, whatever it is, then they become very silly. I just think it’s fundamentally good for people to have some kind of connection with the vitals of life. Dirt and blood and ... I think it’s good for people. Even if you’re a vegetarian or a vegan, being human’s messy, isn’t it? You can’t grow vegetables without killing animals or displacing them or killing pests – it’s a life-or-death bloody business growing lettuce!

I just think it’s fundamentally good for people to have some kind of connection with the vitals of life.

The way I deal with that is to get to grips with it. I do kill animals. I do things that some people might think are cruel. If we’re going to eat sheep I’ll be prepared to kill them and get my hands covered in blood. And if I kill pests, I’m going to try and be as honest as possible about it with everybody. I’ve tried telling people on twitter I kill moles – oh God, what a bloody outcry.

Have you put a picture on Twitter of a line moles on a fence yet?

I haven’t quite got to that! I’m working on that slowly! I have them on the fence and Helen says, take them off, there’s journalists coming ...

Are they on the fence so that whoever's getting paid for catching moles can prove they've been caught, or is it an old tradition?

If I catch five moles for you, you know your moles are on the fence and you pay me five pounds. If I say I've caught five moles, or I show you them, and then I drive off, I could turn up with the same moles at the next farm and I get paid twice. So yes, we hang them on the fence.

Or if there's me and my dad both catching moles, I'm hanging them to show that I've caught two, and it's just part of telling each other what we've done. You're not ashamed of killing moles, 'cos you entirely understand the logic of it. The grounded farmer perspective is, why should I pretend to do anything other than be proud I caught these moles?

I don't go mad, where I can ignore them, I do. It's only when there's a plague of them, like in a meadow. They push the soil up, it goes in the hay, gets wrapped in the plastic, and it turns into listeria. That excellent tup I lost last year, it died from listeria out the hay, probably from soil that had got into the hay.

It's all part of the bigger picture, how the whole system works.

Yes, it is. And everybody – farmers, supermarkets, the whole lot – have all pussy-footed away from it. Everyone is so terrified to be the person who kills Bambi that no one wants to talk about the realities of it. Intellectually you get further and further away from being able to cope with it.

We went to a couple of abattoirs. We went to Dunbia in Preston, a massive factory, and well done from what we could see, and we went to Stephen Airey's down in the South Lakes: a different way of killing, but still the same outcome. Where do you take yours?

We butcher at home for ourselves, with a man from west Cumbria who comes to kill them and chop them up, and we usually sell our fat lambs either store to be fattened by other people or tup lambs that we've fattened, they go dead weight, to Wales. End up on a supermarket shelf, nobody knows they're Herdwick. How sad's that? I get a commercial price for them. Bish bosh bam. But that isn't actually a solution in the long run. I think the National Park and the National Trust and others, they could be really quite radical and creative about that stuff. I mean who can coordinate anything better with the herdwick than the National Trust? They own more farms than anybody else, they've got a national presence, they've got a mass membership.

I met the director of the Cinque Terre National Park in Italy and I said, 'What's your number one objective?' and she said, 'To lower the cost of agricultural production.' I said, 'Really?' She said, 'Yes, the only way this landscape survives as a farmed landscape is if we find ways to lower the cost of production, improve the branding and the marketing and the packaging to add value to the products.' I'm like, 'Oh my God!' I've never heard anything like that from out of our national park, because it isn't from that perspective at all.

Who knows but perhaps the popularity of your books is beginning to change perspectives. What's your ambition in terms of your writing, for the next five, ten years?

Just to be really, really good. Yeah, I mean, well, some of that stuff shouldn't come out your mouth, should it!

Well you don't want to be bad!

I don't want to write gazillions of books and end up being a boring old fart who's written twenty books or something. You can come and tease me if I do become a boring old fart! I want to write three or four books, and for them to be as good as I can do them.

I probably have a really silly male view of it Harriet, but I see it like a competitive thing. Every time I read a great book I think, 'Can I write better than that?' Probably not, but that makes you try doesn't it!



[The Shepherd's Life](#) is published by Penguin.