**Hop and fruit picking in the 20th century**

**Encounters with ‘other’ – ‘crime’s dark crew’**

*The curious colours of the folk afield / The raven hair, the flamy silk, the blue / Washed purple with all weathers; crime’s dark crew; / Babes at the breast; old sailors chewing quids; / And hyacinth eyes beneath soon-dropt eyelids.*

A description of hop pickers in Edmund Blunden’s poem *Old Homes* (1922) reprinted in Church (1964; p.158)

The term ‘othering’ describes the classification of another person or group as belonging to a culturally or socially inferior category. The ‘other’ is different, the opposite of ‘self’, or ‘us’. Othering distances the ‘self’ from what it *believes it is* *not* – the crude, barbarous, uncivilised. This may include denigration, or romanticising of subaltern groups, for example rural labourers, the urban poor, itinerant workers. While othering may displace people to the margins of society, they may still be regarded as quintessential elements of place or shared landscapes.

Itinerant hop and fruit pickers are certainly seen as transient but archetypal characters within the landscapes of Kent. Traditionally London families helped with the hop harvest as a ‘paid holiday’, while other ‘travellers’ followed the seasons and the various fruit harvests; these have been variously discussed in the [literature on Kent](/20c-hop-picking).

[Donald Maxwell](/20c-maxwelld-biography), in \_*The Enchanted Road\_* (1927)sentimentalises his encounters in the hop gardens, despite characterising the pickers as ‘out of place’, as intruders into his idyll:

‘Being the first week in September, the land was full of nomadic Londoners, and the smoke from countless fires bore witness to the annual invasion.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Similarly, Blunden, in his exoticised description of [hop pickers]( ](/20c-hop-picking)) in the poem quoted at the start, uses an incursion metaphor - of ‘tattered armies gathered to the spoil … fierce of eye and tongue’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Maxwell is greeted with cheery good-nature and soon discovers an old acquaintance, a night-watchman from his time producing artwork for the *Graphic*. Maxwell’s reflects how many Londoners and locals remember ‘hopping’ as a positive community experience with elements of carnival. Maxwell notes:

The scenes in these ‘vineyards of the north’ - although there is an element of squalor – are often ‘picturesque’, and the scenes at the time of picking comparable with the scenes in the wine countries of Southern Europe’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Maxwell also describes the changes then taking place as farmers turned to local day-labour due to the cost of ‘raised standard of camping accommodation for the hoppers’ required by law[[4]](#footnote-4). This sounds benign but bears comparison with George Orwell’s experience just a few years later (see below).

Richard Church, in \_*The Little Kingdom: A Kentish Collection\_*, offers other perspectives, from his own patrician stance, to the harsh characterisation of pickers by Richard Jefferies. Jefferies, writing in the late nineteenth century, was renowned as a nature writer who understood the countryside and its people. In the passage reprinted in Church’s collection he pulls no punches in his depiction of three women fruit-pickers, one old, the others young, encountered on a dusty road. He starts with a description of the elder, in whose craggy face black shadows are gathering from too much exposure to sun. In contrast several pages are then given over to a soliloquy on the loveliness of the others; their grace of movement and their features transfigured by the summer light to that ‘golden-brown’ ‘… only found on the human face which has felt the sunshine continually’.[[5]](#footnote-5) There is, yet, a brooding niggle, the effect of sun on the old woman has already been described as detrimental, and other passages remind us of mortal frailty - leaves on a hawthorn hedge ‘browned by the work of caterpillars’[[6]](#footnote-6).

It is, however, the visceral hostility that Jefferies perceives the woman to have for him, a person of seeming leisure, that is shocking. Although he is understanding, noting their lot is to toil from childhood ‘until limbs failed or life closed’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Jefferies bizarrely returns to his soliloquy on beauty and his envy of their ‘health and hue’ and ‘glorious life’. All seems set for a hopeful conclusion as he re-encounters the women that evening and ‘shadow took away something of the coarseness of the group’,[[8]](#footnote-8) only for a quarrel to commence and for the older woman to swear outrageously while the younger ones stagger drunk and incoherent – their coarse ‘otherness’ established.

Church’s own encounter is less threatening, but very much a critique of a subaltern group – semi-migrant pickers lingering in Kent between early fruit and ‘hop-season’. These pickers work for a neighbouring farmer, harvesting Kentish Cobs (a variety of hazel nut). Church declares ‘these chattering semi-gypsies [sic] … [show] no respect for person or distinction of class, if there is such a thing in this postwar world’,[[9]](#footnote-9) nor is respect shown for his dog, at which they throw nut shells and pass loud remarks regarding his ancestral characteristics!

More ‘sociological’ treatments were provided by Jack London and George Orwell, both joined the ‘tramps’ and others from London desperately drawn to the ‘hopping’ for the wages. London’s book \_*People of the Abyss\_* (1903) examined the slum conditions of the East End of London as he experienced them during 1902, including ‘hopping’ in Kent. Orwell encountered similarly poor conditions during 1931. At one farm he was refused work, as the farmer could not provide adequate accommodation and Government inspectors were actively checking conditions. This effectively meant large numbers of unemployed Londoners could not get crucial employment in the hop-fields.

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## For fictional accounts of hop picking see [Hop Picking and the Literary Imagination](20c-hop-picking)

**### Bibliography**

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Jeffreries, Richard (1885) *The Open Air* (London: Chatto & Windus); passage reprinted in Church (1964)

1. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)