Leo Simpson

OF COWS AND MEN

"Cows," said my neighbor Burt, when I moved to the country ten years ago, "can't run downhill. Their front legs are shorter than their back legs, that's why. If you are ever chased by a cow, run down a hill. The same thing applies to bears."

Burt was a gaunt man in his seventies with leathery skin and coal-black hair. His face was as solemn as an undertaker's. My wife and I, being city folk, were grateful for all tips. I kept his information about cows in mind as a truth until one day some two months later, while out with the dog, I chanced to disturb a cow and her new calf. Fortunately I was on a hill. Down the slope I staggered, the cow in pursuit, my overweight mongrel out ahead and making for home at greyhound speed. Before long I was alarmed to hear the thump of hooves getting nearer. Sure enough, the 1,100-pound mother was overtaking me. As it happened, the cow—who could run downhill much faster than she could run uphill, of course

—simply lumbered past in a bored way and veered off to return to her calf.

This experience taught me a lesson. I learned to be skeptical of information from country people. Their sense of humor has elements of irresponsibility in it, as if no punishment can be too harsh for believing everything you hear. Notice that a bear was thrown into the misinformation. Picture the suicidal stupidity of trying to escape downhill from a bear, an animal that is speedier than a cow, much angrier when roused, and rarely bored by a chase. In fact, although I was acting on criminally humorous advice, my life was spared by virtues commonly displayed by cows—mainly economy of effort and mellowness of temperament.

It was Burt who gave me the dog, Andy, as a gift. A good cow dog is essential in cow country, Burt told me, which is true enough. A dog brings the cows home from far distances and keeps them out of your orchard in the fall and your garden in the spring. I had seen how a cow dog works in Burt's fields. His dog, Lassie, running and circling, could gather scattered cows into a cohesive drive with lovely efficiency. The cows always obeyed the dog.

Imagine my bewilderment, as the new owner of a cow dog, when I was awakened one summer morning by the bawling of cows. My garden was full of cows. They seemed as distressed about where they were as I was, as they milled around and trampled lettuce, radishes, corn and beans. I had no idea how to approach cows. I had never been so close to cows in my life, and the questions I asked myself were primitive, the kind early man probably asked himself upon encountering a strange new beast, an auroch, say—the ferocious distant ancestor that evolved into the cow. What is its power? What is its nature? Is it intelligent? I also asked myself this: How come my splendid cow dog, Andy, let these bloody animals in here?

Andy was on the verandah, half-hidden behind the rain barrel, watching the cows in naked fear. When I shouted at him he flinched, pulled himself together a little and charged, desperately, without style, straight at the cows. Most scattered to parts of the garden they hadn't trampled yet. Some spun on the axis of their legs, dipped their heads and attacked Andy. At this point I felt very insecure. Shooing a cow from one place to another is an operation that depends entirely on the cooperation of the cow. Any cow who sees the business as a contest of wills and decides to fight has a fantastic advantage in weight and muscle.

Andy flashed by me, making for the cover of the rain barrel, the whites of his eyes rolling in terror. Not wanting to retreat and leave my garden to be ravaged and certainly not willing to make a movement that the militant cows in the group might feel was threatening, I froze. What the cows wanted, as I discovered by accident, was for me to show them a way
out of the garden. More stray cows came up my lane (cows do like to get together as much as possible). As I ran to head off these newcomers, shouting, throwing stones and so on, the main body of cows simply followed me out the garden gate, slowly filtering through the small opening like shoppers going through a supermarket checkout.

Later in the morning I went to see Burt to find out something about these new things in my life, cows. (I often visited him in those days. I don’t see him at all now.) He listened to my questions solemnly. Strangely, he didn’t seem to know much about cows. (That was when he told me that cows could not run downhill, and neither could bears.)

So I began to learn about the cow on my own. I came to respect and admire her. How noble she is, with her deep brown eyes, her monumental integrity, her stately gait, her swollen undercarriage of nourishment for the world. Cows are very restful to look at. They always return your stare, and quite inoffensively. They stare as a group with immense intentness but without a trace of curiosity. Cows do not need tranquilizers or transcendental meditation. They live in deep tranquility as a permanent state of mind, and a jittery human can actually absorb some of this placidity by hanging around with them, as I did.

Their reputation for stupidity is undeserved. What cows have succeeded in doing over the centuries is confine their lives and interests to essentials—food and comfort and their young. Ralph Waldo Emerson noted this, in a critical spirit, when he said: “A cow does not gaze at the rainbow, or show any interest in the landscape, or a peacock, or the sound of thrushes.” That’s poor observation on Emerson’s part. Cows are very conscious of landscape, as theatrical background, and the advantage of being unaffected by moments of beauty is that you are equally unbothered by anguish. This is the way cows are. Unlike us, their nervous systems are not stretched in pain over an intricate web of worries and fears and anxieties. When a cow becomes upset her reaction is total. Her system seizes up. She stops giving milk. It becomes someone else’s responsibility to find out what the problem is and put it right. Every cow functions as her own trade union.

During my life as a cow groupie, I would now and then go to local farmers for information. The result was always unsatisfactory. Farmers do not always respond well to searching questions about cows. Indeed they prefer not to respond at all. Some cows strayed into my lane one autumn afternoon. I didn’t recognize the breed and went over to see Burt, who was digging sand out of a culvert with his friend Hal, a stringy man of ninety or so. They both leaned courteously on their shovels to listen to me while I explained that some strays were in my lane and I needed to know what they were so that I could notify the owner. I gave these expert dairy-farmers the technical description in detail—size, shape and face and midriff markings. Burt and Hal went into deep thought together, looking up at the sky and down at the ground, never at each other. Finally, shaking his head, committing himself to the difficult opinion, Burt said: “They sound like cows to me. I’m pretty near certain that’s what they are, cows.” He said: “Unless’n they’re horses.”

With the attitude I had then, I thought I understood how country people get a reputation for being slow-witted. I thought I was being tactful when I thanked them for their help.

My farm is in eastern Ontario, roughly between Ottawa and Toronto, where the land can be lush but tends to throw up lots of Precambrian rock. This is renowned cheese-making country, and so my first and principal contact was with dairy cows, who outnumber beef cattle in Ontario by more than two to one. Beef steers are quite different. They have shallower contemplative reserves and seem to think and worry more. Watching a cow chewing and watching you back is blissful. A steer momentarily looks like a cow—there is a flash of similarity, in the way that the austere camel reminds you of a provincial court judge, but that’s as far as it goes. The steer, while not exactly skittish, doesn’t have the cow’s awesome maternal sureness. A steer looks something like a seriously drugged juvenile delinquent—jaws moving on a wad of gum, an indication of latent threat in the stance. He has been castrated by society and he is being ignobly reared for his meat, so he is touchy. Only rookie cow buffs check for an udder. A true devotee can identify a cow by looking into the noble beast’s eyes.

I hung around cows for personal reasons. Like the angler going to the trout stream, it was my habit to strike off across the fields after a day’s work and unwind with the cows, listening to them crop grass—a satisfying rip, like tearing cloth—and exchanging long tranquilizing stares with different groups. Still, it was natural that I should be able to recognize Holsteins by their color after a while—black and white—and the other main dairy breeds: Ayrshires, Jerseys, Guernseys, Brown Swiss and Dual-purpose Shorthorns (a special kind of cow bred both for milk and meat).

A cow is a self-contained production factory, uniquely served by four stomach compartments that enable the animal to bring swallowed food back into her mouth to be chewed and swallowed again. (Think about what a cow is tasting the next time you see one meditatively chewing her cud.) As the food travels through her it seems to grow in bulk rather than be assimilated into the body, judging by the amount of manure she leaves behind. It’s not unusual for a good Holstein, the commonest breed in

1. Of geological period predating the Cambrian era (the era of fossil-bearing rock formation).
Canada, to yield ten thousand quarts of milk in a year, as well as about thirty thousand pounds of high-quality manure.

Holsteins have been bred for dairy purposes for more than two thousand years and were first imported to North America by Dutch settlers in the late eighteenth century. They are known for their high milk production and low butterfat. Like most of their sisters, they no longer have horns (calves are de-horned while still very young, though some breeds have been rendered hornless through selective breeding).

Cows are almost eternally pregnant. They can't give milk unless they have given birth, so cows are usually bred at between fifteen and twenty-seven months old and once a year after that. After the birth of a calf, a cow gives milk for about ten months. Of course they are not normally milked by hand anymore, though I am told that is the secret of building strong wrists for baseball or tennis. Most farmers now use milking machines, the effects of which are noticed by close neighbors and passing motorists in the form of relentless static on the radio during chores times.

Before settlement, no cows were native to North America, but Canada can claim the oldest dairy breed in the Western Hemisphere. Known worldwide as Canadian cattle and found mostly in Quebec, they bear a striking resemblance to the original Guernseys and Jerseys of the Channel Islands because they all were bred from the same French stock, now extinct in Europe. Canadian cattle are direct descendants of animals that came from Normandy and Brittany, beginning as long ago as 1518 when Baron de Lery imported them to Sable Island, Nova Scotia, in France's first attempt to establish itself in North America. Jacques Cartier brought more on his third voyage in 1541, and Samuel de Champlain ferried regular boatloads to the French settlements in 1608-10. Fifty years later Louis XIV ordered that a shipment of the best cows of Normandy be sent to New France. In 1667 Canada had a cow population of more than three thousand, all French nobility, every one an aristocrat.

A word of warning: it is not good to know too much about cows if you are an admirer. Watch them from a distance and you will receive a reward of pure joy. They like picturesque country. They like to strike pastoral poses and to reproduce Constable paintings in nature. No movie director could arrange cows in a field as attractively as they arrange themselves. If there is a hill, some cows will lie on the slope—all facing the same way—while their calves play. If there is a pond, other cows will stand knee-deep in the water so that they are reflected upside-down. Cows like to pretend to be statues against the setting sun, letting their long purple shadows fall on the pastureland. On a summer morning they move through the ground mist as if walking on clouds.

A Victim

relationship is your best bet if you like cows. Do not become too closely involved, as I did, depending on them for peace of mind, respecting their nobility and assuming that cows can respect us to the end, maybe not as friends but as partners.

When I began to see the final, bleak answers to my city-man questions, I thought I would give Burt a last chance to treat me as an equal. I found him leaning on a gate and watching Lassie driving the herd toward the barns. The cows moved unhurriedly in the proper direction while Lassie trotted here and there behind them. My dog Andy was at home on the verandah, asleep behind the rain barrel.

"I was wondering what happens to cows in the end, when they can't give any more milk or calves," I said. "Is it old dairy cows who come under the heading of utility grade beef in the United States? That's Canada black brand here, Burt."

"I can't tell about that," Burt said solemnly, a normal answer from him. "I'll tell you this, though. My biggest problem with cows is diarrhea. I have to give them special medicine to cure it. If you see any cows of mine with diarrhea, give me a call."

That was his last chance. I don't ask Burt for advice and information anymore. I would give him back his dog if I could.

1979

2. The reference is to John Constable (1776-1837), celebrated English painter of landscapes.