BBC BOOKS

Young James Herriot

The Making of the World's Most Famous Vet

JOHN LEWIS-STEMPEL

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About the Book

We all know James Herriot, the author of the legendary *All Creatures Great and Small*, but how did a young student named Alf Wight become the man who won the hearts of readers the world over? *Young Herriot* is the fascinating story of Alf's formative years in Glasgow and the work at the veterinary college that began his career.

Based on Wight's college diaries and case notes, as well as original research into the history of the time, *Young Herriot* brings to life the by-gone era of veterinary medicine during the 1930s – the 'good old bad old days– before antibiotics – as well as Wight's personal experiences when faced with the curriculum and the teaching regime at Glasgow Veterinary College.

Accompanying a major BBC drama series, *Young Herriot* is a stunning addition to the James Herriot canon – a richly nostalgic tale of one ordinary boy's journey to become an extraordinary, world famous vet and writer.

Other books by John Lewis-Stempel

England: The Autobiography

The Wild Life

Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War

The Autobiography of the British Soldier

Fatherhood

YOUNG JAMES HERRIOT

THE MAKING OF THE
WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS VET

BBC BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

I write this surrounded by four dogs. Outside the window are ponies, cows, sheep, chickens, goats, ducks and a goose that escaped Christmas.

James Herriot would love it. But then James Herriot is to blame for it. As a child growing up in the Seventies, I was addicted to his books detailing his life as a country vet in Yorkshire. Not to mention the TV series and the films.

I even wanted to be a vet; alas my quite remarkable inability to do maths prevented that so I settled my imbibed love of animals by taking up my family's usual method of employment. Farming. Well, that and writing books. And yes, I was influenced in that course too by one James Herriot.

Reading James Herriot's books as an adult I was struck by their greatness. I do mean greatness. The 'heart-warming charm' of his books sometimes beguiles as to their perfection in characterization, construction and prose. Look at *If Only They Could Talk* or *It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet* with a critical eye. Herriot, it can be said without exaggeration, can be mentioned in the same hallowed breath as Thackeray, Maugham or his own favourite author, P.G. Wodehouse.

It will come as a surprise to many, as it did to me, to find that James Herriot, the man who gave his name to 'Herriot Country' in North Yorkshire, was actually born in another

area of the North East, Sunderland. He was then taken at a few weeks old to live in Glasgow, where he was ‘bred’.

And, his real name was James Alfred Wight; James Herriot was a pen name, conjured up to avoid the problem that vets were not allowed to write books in the 1970s in their own names because this could be construed as advertising.

It is the life of Alf Wight – he was always known by his middle name – from birth until his joining the famous veterinary practice of Siegfried Farnon in Darrowby at the age of 23 that is the subject of *Young Herriot*. Specifically, how a boy from a working-class shipbuilding family in Depression-era Glasgow became both a vet and a writer. Although James Herriot did not publish a book until 1966, when he was 50 and living in Thirsk (the real Darrowby), James Herriot, as veterinarian and as author, was made in Glasgow. His accomplishments were his own, but he would have been the first to acknowledge the part his family and his adopted city played in his success; ‘With love to my mother,’ reads the telling inscription in *Vet in Harness*, ‘in dear old Glasgow town.’

Glasgow was also where Alf undertook his studies to become a vet. Glasgow Veterinary College in the Thirties was an eccentric institution. But Glasgow Veterinary College, like Glasgow itself, did something right: the two most successful veterinary authors in British history both came from Glasgow, and both attended Glasgow Veterinary College. One was Alf Wight; the other was his friend Eddie Straiton, the ‘TV Vet’.

James Herriot was fortunate, frankly, to train and practise as a vet when he did but all great writers are attended by a lucky star that puts them in the right place at the right time. He was witness to, and chronicler of, the very last days of an old order, in which vets did not yet have antibiotics and their farmer clients were not yet agri-businessmen. A pre-deluge society where the vet trailed an

aura of black magic as he (and it was almost overwhelmingly he) arrived on small farms that seemed to grow, along with assorted livestock, colourful characters as a matter of course.

Antibiotics, in the shape of the sulphonamides, were discovered in a series of quiet experiments by Germany's IG Farben company in 1932. It is impossible to overestimate the impact of IG Farben's patented antimicrobial drugs. Vets went from making up colourful potions (frequently of dubious efficaciousness) to injecting colourless antibiotics of near miraculous nature. Within just ten years of Alf Wight leaving Glasgow Veterinary College in 1939, antibiotics had taken over, as Ken Mitchell who went to Edinburgh in 1944 to study veterinary science, discovered:

> *When I was a student I lived in a hostel with a lot of medical students. I was given penicillin, which was a trial drug, by them because I had laryngitis. By the time I had finished my course in 1949–50, antibiotics had become available not only in the human field but in the animal field as well and were starting to become well established in farm practise. You could now do surgery on the farm safely, for instance, and surgical operations such as caesarean sections became very common because you could use antibiotics to follow up and prevent infection*.

With antibiotics, the vet's job changed utterly. Today it might be said that the vet's job is more about stopping illness starting than treating illness. In the words of Peter Jinman, President of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons:

Preventative medicine is the thing today. Rather than getting the vet out as a 'fire brigade', as in Herriot's day, the modern farmer has the vet out to discuss what the health plan will be for the species he's farming. That's not to say that vets have stopped doing fire-brigade work, but there's a definite emphasis change. Of course, the farmer's so much more knowledgeable now, he's a very trained individual. The farmer and the vet – it is one profession dealing with another profession today.

The antibiotic revolution was doubtless good for animals and for food production. It was less good for veterinary autobiography. Alf Wight would claim that veterinary science in the Thirties and early Forties was harder work and less effective. 'But it was more fun.'

Who can argue?

It is this lost era of pre-War veterinary practice that the TV series *Young Herriot* brings to life. The show was the brainchild of Johnny Byrne; Johnny – who died in 2008 – wrote a number of episodes for *All Creatures Great and Small*. He knew Alf well, and felt that a 'James Herriot: The Early Years' about Alf's time at Glasgow Veterinary College in the Thirties would make a drama to equal and complement the original.

The TV series draws on Alf's unpublished novels, diaries, case-books and historical records from the time to authentically recreate Glasgow and the activity inside Glasgow Veterinary College. But Johnny wanted a drama, rather than a documentary, something that would touch the screen magic of the Christopher Timothy-Robert Hardy-Peter Davison *All Creatures Great and Small*. Quite properly, this required some artistic license, so while the series is based on Alf's college years it is not a dotted i and crossed t accurate account of them. For *Young Herriot*, Johnny created a new friendship triangle reminiscent of

Siegfried, Tristan and James – in *Young Herriot*, we have Whirly Tyson and Rob McAloon, both inspired by an archive of characters from the time. While Alf lived at home throughout his college years, Whirly, Rob and James live together in fictional Crannoch House run by the alluring young widow Mrs Monro. The stories in the series are taken from Alf's student casebook, but with a dramatization that enables them to come leaping to life in Glasgow and the countryside beyond.

TV drama is about the essence of things. A book to accompany the *Young Herriot* series was called for, because a book has the luxury of explanation and elucidation for those in want of more information. The subtitle of this book is precise and deliberate: *The Early Life and Times of James Herriot*. It is the biography of the real James Herriot, Alf Wight, but it is also the biography of the world in which he grew up and studied, of Glasgow and of veterinary medicine, because this world helps to explain him and his uniqueness.

It was another world, a world now long gone by.

JOHN LEWIS-STEMPEL

PROLOGUE

THROUGH THE ARCH

On the bright morning of 25 September 1933, 16-year-old Alf Wight clambered up the narrow canyon of Garnet Street in Glasgow's West End. So steep was the incline that the cobbles were oddly tilted, to allow the horses that hauled the coal up to the faded terraces and tenements to get a purchase with their metal shoes. A black Austin car coming down the hill rattled and skewed, its brakes smoking. Some of Alf's fellow panting pedestrians halted to catch their breath. He pressed on. An ardent follower of Lieutenant J. P. Muller's famous fitness regime and an athletics medallist at school, Alf Wight was not to be beaten by a hill. Besides, only a year ago he had been ill enough with diphtheria to come close to death: there was still pleasure to be had in every physical triumph over that disease, the name of which no-one spoke lightly in a crowded city such as Glasgow.

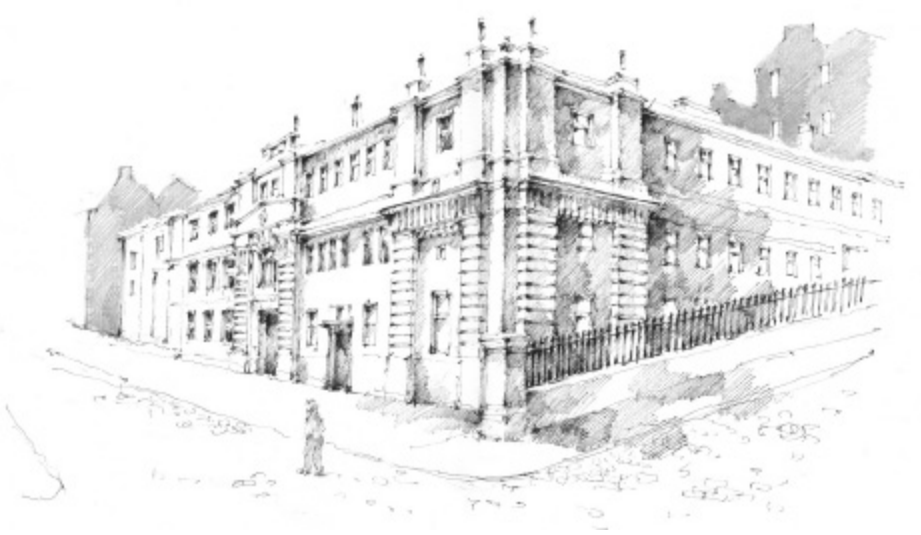
He was at the top and on the downhill. Almost there. Like every student starting college, his head ebbed with nerves and anticipation. There were other students scurrying along beside him, some probably to his college, but Glasgow School of Art (to which the young men wearing modish berets were presumably bound) and the dental school were both nearby on Renfrew Street.

Entering Buccleuch Street, Alf bore right and walked along until he reached his destination, number 83, a long, low building on the corner with Garnethill Street. It was not, he knew from attending his interview there, the most

glorious seat of learning. It had no soaring spires, no shady quads, no honey-stoned façades. The building was dilapidated, covered with a job lot of yellow paint, and looked much like the Corporation utilities building it used to be. Now, though, 83 Buccleuch Street was, as the sign on the wall announced, ‘Glasgow Veterinary College (Incorporated)’, one of only four places in Great Britain in 1933 where a vet could be trained.

Bordered by Sauchiehall Street to the south and West Graham Street to the north, Garnethill was the Soho of Glasgow, its narrow-gorge streets known to all theatre artistes as the place for digs and to all creatives as the place to live. Over on Renfrew Street sat the Scottish beacon of Bohemianism, Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art building, with its eclectic architectural mix of *art nouveau*, austere Scottish baronial and iron industrial. For decades, Garnethill had been a refuge for foreigners arriving in Glasgow, and at 129 Hill Street was the unobtrusive Garnethill synagogue, constructed in 1879, the first purpose-built synagogue in Scotland.

‘Raffish’ was the word Alf attached to Garnethill, but the drumlin – precipitous enough for handrails to be installed so that those going up could pull themselves, those going down could steady themselves – had not altogether lost bourgeois respectability. Glasgow Veterinary College at 83 Buccleuch Street sided Garnethill High School for Girls, a very proper educational establishment, which a Glaswegian Miss Jean Brodie would have recognized with a rebellious shudder and tried to liberate her ‘gals’ from.



Alf stepped towards the arched doorway of Glasgow Veterinary College, the former entrance for horses and carts. A small crowd of uncertain figures had gathered underneath: the new students. The seniors swanned in.

James Alfred Wight – as Alf was properly known – had already made several steps, as yet unrecognized, towards becoming James Herriot, the world's most famous vet and the teller of autobiographical tales about a country veterinary practice that would enthral millions. He had become fascinated with dogs, which was the prime reason he was about to go through the arch into Glasgow Veterinary College: he wanted to be a dog doctor. With self-sacrificing support from his parents – and by virtue of his acute intelligence – he had gone to one of Glasgow's best schools, where he had received the education that enabled him to enter veterinary college. He already wrote in a modest way, too: a diary, a couple of pieces for the school mag. Living on the absolute edge of Glasgow, he had become half a country boy, spending much of his spare time tramping the encircling green hills with his dog, Don. The city of Glasgow, that one-off metropolitan miracle of low mean streets and high exhilarating culture, had given him some things too, from a sharp self-deprecating humour to the Clyde-built inner steel that allows every Glaswegian to

stick his or her chin out at adversity. There remained only the small matter of the training to actually be a vet.

In passing through the arch at 83 Buccleuch Street, Alf Wight would have his life transfigured. As Alf was about to discover, Glasgow Veterinary College's staff and students were to be counted amongst the most eccentric in academia. Despite – or more likely because of – its singularity, the institution made vets who were to be the most sought after in general practice. There was nowhere quite like Glasgow Veterinary College in the Thirties. But then, as Alf was also about to discover, there was nothing quite like veterinary medicine in the Thirties.

PART ONE

ABOUT A BOY

IT WAS A world of noise.

3 October 1916: the Great War had begun two long years before, and as James Wight entered the world with a birth squall, men were leaving it screaming in the autumnal remains of the battle of the Somme. Among the early British casualties of the battle, when it was still a sunlit summer affair, was the baby's uncle, Alfred Wight, a sergeant in the 19th battalion of the Durham Light Infantry. The notice of Alfred Wight's death to his family was a black-edged telegram from the War Office. The telegraph boy knocked on many doors in the backstreets of Sunderland in 1916.

Alfred Wight was dead but his name lived on. It was inscribed on the skyline memorial to the fallen at Thiepval, and 'Alfred' was given as the middle name of the nephew he would never see. In fact, the baby boy born at number 111 Brandling Street – a red-brick terrace house named 'Fashoda' in the Roker area of Sunderland – would always be known as 'Alf', in preference to his proper first name, James, which came from his father, a 26-year-old ship plater. Like the nobility, working-class families in the early twentieth century passed down male names as if they were precious jewels.

* * *

Although Sunderland is slap on the north-east coast of England, far from the Western Front battlefields, the town rattled and reverberated with war sounds. There was sporadic shelling of the coast from German battleships and there were Zeppelin raids at night. Only six months before Alf was born, Zeppelin L-11 bombed the Star Cinema in Calvert Street, killing 22 people. The Zeppelins navigated to Sunderland by the fire-glow from the blast furnaces and foundries; everywhere in the town was the cacophony of factories turning out military materiel, of the ships being made in the yards on the banks of the Wear, where the clocking-on and clocking-off of the hobnail-booted workforce was signalled by the sounding of giant horns. In the 1840s, Sunderland had been the greatest shipbuilding centre in the world; by 1916 the town had declined in shipbuilding glory, but there were still 16 yards on the Wear, the tidal river that runs through Sunderland to the North Sea. The firms of J. L. Thompson and J. Blumer & Co. were almost on the doorstep of Fashoda.

* * *

Amid the noise of the shipyards and industrial Sunderland, other sounds lingered and beguiled. There was the Saturday afternoon roar of the crowd at Roker Park, home of Sunderland Association Football Club since 1898, when the 6th Marquess of Londonderry had turned the symbolic key to the entrance gates. Fashoda was almost within leather ball-throwing distance of the ground. Like his father, Alf would become a fanatical follower of ‘The Black Cats’. ‘I swear I never learned nursery rhymes,’ Alf remarked, years later. ‘I merely recited the names of the great players he [his father] had watched at Roker Park. As a very young child I knew of Buchan, Mordue, Holley, Cuggy and all the others my father idolised. To my father,

anyone who played for Sunderland was a god in red and white.'

Football in 1916 was something more than a Saturday afternoon spectacle. Fifty years before, the public schools of England had taken the medieval brawl that was 'football' into the cloisters, and made it a game with rules, notably that of 'fair play'. Since then, public schoolboys of the 'muscular Christian' sort had returned the game to the people for their self-improvement. (Not a few clubs, among them Aston Villa, sprang from Sunday school; Sunderland AFC began as a club of the improvers of the people, school teachers.) In the year of the Somme, Association football was still the exhibition of model behaviour, a moral force for good.

There was also the sound of music. Alf's mother, Hannah – a force of nature, strong-willed, with fine, attractive features – also had a fine, attractive contralto voice, said by family members to cause them to cry because of its beauty. In those far-off decades at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not unusual for families to gather around a piano (pianos then could be hired, as well as bought) in the flickering gaslit parlour, but even by the standards of the age, the Bells were musical. Hannah sang outside the home at concerts, and her parents belonged to all the Sunderland musical societies.

Music was the food of love between Hannah and Alf's father, James, who was more than the 'ship plater' he entered as his occupation on official documents. Despite losing an index finger in a youthful accident, James Wight was an accomplished pianist who played the organ in services at the Primitive Methodist Chapel on Williamson Terrace. Along with other manufacturing centres in the North, Sunderland had long been a centre of the evangelical, revivalist brand of John Wesley's creed, and James Wight must have been accustomed to formidable

females like Hannah Bell; the Primitive Methodists had allowed women as preachers for 50 years.

As well as sitting at the organ in the plain brick chapel on Williamson Terrace, Jim Wight played piano and organ in the local cinemas. To perk up the new fangled silent ‘flickers’, film distributors sent ‘cue sheets’ out to cinemas containing lists of scenes and suggested pieces or styles of music to be played alongside them; *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith’s 1916 big-budget melodrama set in the American Civil War, even had a specially composed full score (by Joseph Carl Breil). But cue sheet or score, there was always ample opportunity for the cinema pianist to improvise, because the projectors broke down with audience-dismaying frequency. If the film caught fire or the projector bulb blew, the pianist filled in the unofficial interlude with a happy tune to distract the booing crowd in the stalls.

Someone like James Wight, dressed in a black dinner suit, playing a grand piano was the minimum musical staff in a cinema in 1916; bigger theatres had orchestras. Since films were on their way to becoming the entertainment medium of the people, cinemas were on their way to being the main employers of musicians. The pay for ‘tinkling the old Joanna’ in a cinema was £3 for a full week, but many musicians, like James Wight, were moonlighting from other jobs.

Until cinemas could be built or converted from existing buildings, films were shown in theatres. In Sunderland, the first sole-purpose cinemas were Monkwearmouth Picture Hall (a refitted chapel), the West End Electric Cinema, the Theatre de Luxe Cinema and the 2000-seat Havelock Cinema on the High Street. At the Sunderland Empire, the town’s grandest venue, with its baroque 90-foot tower topped by a revolving steel globe bearing the figure of Terpsicore, seats in the stalls were 2d, and for 7/6d you could be the little emperor of all you surveyed from a box.

Aside from *Birth of a Nation*, the big film doing the rounds in 1916 was the British documentary about the death of a generation, *The Battle of the Somme*, the official record of the great advance, which sold twenty million tickets within six weeks of its release on 21 August. When it was shown to soldiers on rest, their chief complaint was that it lacked the furious noise of combat. Not even low-end 'Agitato Heavy' from Jim Wight's keyboard could simulate that.

Making music was the utter counterpoint to the work Jim Wight did in the shipyards, since few jobs in shipbuilding were more physically gruelling than plating. 'Ironfighters' was the suitable colloquialism for steel-trades workers like platers. A plater cut the steel plates that made up the ship's hull to rough size, trimmed them, and then curved them to perfection with hard, exquisite blows from a sledgehammer. Every job in shipbuilding had its noise, from the fusillade of the riveters to the splash of the welders; the noise of plating was barbaric gonging. No-one had ear protection; men went gradually deaf by the day.

After pounding the hull plates into shape, the plater's gang drilled lines of rivet holes with pointed steel rods, before 'shouldering' the plates from the 'shop' (a shed) to the hull on the open slipway, where the plates were hung ready for the riveters. Whether it was summer or winter, the job produced a blinding sweat under the ubiquitous flat tweed cap.

The work required strength, but also skill. Platers were artisans, men who took pride in their product. They could always be distinguished from the mass going through the yard gates by their metal tool-box. Inside were the tools of their trade: a hammer, centre punch, set square, protractor and level. Platers were trained to read the drawings coming out of the office. One fine day, James Wight himself would move from open yard to shipbuilder's office.

* * *

The plain brick chapel on Williamson Terrace where James played the organ was built in 1881; as John Betjeman wrote, such Nonconformist architecture showed ‘more surely than any Victorian Established church … what was the true architecture of the people. Not since medieval days had the people clubbed together to adorn a place of worship and this time it was not a shrine but a preaching house.’

Methodists ‘clubbing together’ to build a chapel was just one form of the self-organization beloved of the Victorian working-class into which Jim Wight and Hannah Bell were born. It is significant that Hannah’s father, Robert Bell, and his wife Jane, owned rather than rented Fashoda; in the phrase beloved of Edwardian social commentators, the Bells were ‘respectable working class’; the emphasis was, in the mind of the commentators, on ‘respectable’, but it should be on ‘working’, because there was no respectability without work. The Bells worked – and had worked upwards socially – with an ethic a Protestant would understand. Theirs was a world of friendly societies, Sunday schools, Mechanics’ Institutes, reading rooms, trades unions. At Boldon, a mile or so away from Roker, the miners had a library funded from their own thin pockets, where the shelves boasted Walter Scott, Shakespeare, Milton, the Bible, the Brontës, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas and George Eliot.

Sober, unpretentious, hard-working, auto-didactic, self-improving, cultured – small wonder that the British working class of the Victorian and Edwardian periods was the envy of the world. Alf Wight’s parents would migrate from Methodism and even from their ‘birth class’, but they would not leave the moral and spiritual values learned there.

Hannah Bell and James Henry Wight were married on 17 July 1915 in that same Methodist chapel. There is a photograph of the wedding party, all suits, button-holes and bouquets: the Wights, as well as the Bells, were eminently respectable Wearside working class. But Hannah and Jim had dreams beyond Sunderland and the social rung on the ladder that birth had allotted them. They wanted careers in music.

It was Hannah who was the driver in the marriage, the glint of determination and focus there in the eyes in every monochrome snap. Jim was always the picture of gentle, open-faced amiability. Some of Hannah's relatives nicknamed her 'Duchess' for her airs and aspirations. It wasn't meant cruelly; the Bells, like the Wights, were a tight-knit supportive clan. It was just that Hannah wanted to go further up in the world, to improve herself.

If you are from the north of England in the second decade of the twentieth century, where do you go for the bright lights of a career in music? Across Britain stretches an invisible cultural barrier, and its line of latitude is just below Sunderland. A Hadrian's Wall of the mind. Above it is 'the North', below it 'the South'. When Scottish music-hall comics go on tour, they don't venture south of Wearside because nobody understands their humour or accents.

So, if you are from Sunderland in the 1910s and you want a career in music, you go to Glasgow, the Second City of the British Empire. Before they married, Hannah seems to have sent Jim off as a pathfinder to Glasgow, a city that had the advantage of offering both entertainment opportunities galore, plus the bread-and-butter of work in shipbuilding. In October 1914, Jim wrote to Hannah from Glasgow on a postcard:

> *I arrived here 10.10 today. Made tracks for Yarrows at once. Everything proved satisfactory*.