SOME WINDMILLS in literature

When the idea of Windmills was bruited I was quite cavalier in my response; of course there are so many ways of tackling the subject, I thought, and tossed off a suggestion of dealing with windmills as they appear in literature. It all began, in my mind, with the happy recollection of reading Alphonse Daudet's *Lettres de mon Moulin*, but inevitably Don Quixote, lance in hand, loomed up a bit further south. Surely, too, there was *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot? Well, it is time to face the reality of a piece for the vu3a windmill project. Here comes the catch; I am virtually warned off Spanish mills, because Lynda, on the other side of the globe, has pre-empted me (and out-classed me). Confession is good for the soul, they say, and I have to confess that I have never read *The Mill on the Floss*, nor do I intend to at my present age. (I am either far too old or far too young). I fondly believe that all the other members of our group will agree that the tag "So much to do, so little time" is highly relevant to Third Agers, especially when confronted by the challenge of assimilating new technology in

all its tempting forms, be they digital imaging, mp3 or whatever.

That looks as if I am left with Daudet and his windmill! To be honest, I thought about Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, and turned up the Miller's Tale.

Geoffrey Chaucer

One of the commentaries says of this story: 'It seems a shame to do anything with the Miller's Tale except laugh heartily! To insert too much intellectual analysis may rob this, the best of "dirty" stories, of its charm.' So I will leave it there, after having perhaps whetted your curiosity or appetite. If that is so, I shall leave a footnote with the URL of a website that carries the full text in both Middle English and Modern English.[i] In any case, the connection is tenuous, because the story is about a carpenter or two, and not about a miller. I suppose that he would not choose to vilify his fellow tradesmen.

So then, back to my origins, and the Provençal windmill,

if it ever existed. I need to explain how these 'letters' came to be written. Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) was born in Nîmes in Provence, the son of a silk manufacturer with whom he really did not get on. When Alphonse was eight, the business failed, the family moved to Lyon, and Alphonse more or less opted out of school. He wrote his first novel when he was fourteen years old (unpublished!), but had to take a post as a study master in a boarding school in the Cévennes to keep himself. It was not a happy time for him, and in 1857 he moved to Paris, where his older brother Ernest had settled, and wrote pieces for newspapers, especially for *Le Figaro*. A volume of poems, *Les Amoureuses* (*Women in Love*), his first published book, came out the next year. He slowly prospered and from 1861 to 1865 was private secretary to the Duc de Morny. This employment allowed him plenty of time for his writing. He had met in 1860 Frédéric Mistral, a towering figure in Provence, recognised in 1904 by the award of a Nobel Prize for literature, and his enthusiasm for the South was awakened. Sadly, Daudet did not enjoy the best of health, and he spent part of 1861/62 in Corsica and Algiers, gathering material for his writing. The publication of his "Letters from my Windmill" between 1866 and 1869 did not at first establish his reputation. To begin with they were the result of a collaboration with Paul Arène, and appeared in the press. Daudet himself remarked wryly that their appearance in book form was not a great success - scarcely 2000 copies were sold. Yet, today it is for this work that he is best known.

So, what do these letters purport to be?

Daudet, a Parisian with a Provençal heart, buys 'as is' a derelict windmill from the grand-daughter of a dead miller, Maître Cornille (we hear a bit more of him

later on). The book starts with the supposed legal document that records the sale of the flour mill.[ii] It was perched on a wooded hillside, but overgrown with wild vines, rosemary and other vegetation up to the sails. Daudet then moves in[iii], much to the surprise of the resident rabbits, who had enjoyed squatters' rights for so long, and of the owl who lived upstairs. He sets the scene: it was the time for the flocks which had spent the summer months up in the high pastures to come back to the farm, to be greeted by a general commotion from the ducks, hens and other fowl, and to be herded into the farmyard by the dogs who had spent the summer guarding them from wolves. Until the last straggler was safely home, they had no time to waste socialising with the home team.

After the backdrop has been painted, Daudet gives an account of his arrival at the mill and a flavour of some local characters on his coach journey from the town of Beaucaire to Fontvieille, where his windmill is supposedly located -- about twenty miles. A bit like Chaucer's pilgrims, we learn quite a lot about his four fellow passengers. They comprised a 'gardien' from the Camargue, -- one might liken him to a cowboy in the American sense of the word rather than a dodgy builder or plumber -- a small bearded, weather-beaten man, who had been summoned by a magistrate for striking a shepherd with a fork. Hot-blooded folk, these Camarguais!

Next were a baker from Beaucaire and his son-in-law, good Catholics both, arguing the rival merits of the differing forms of mariolatry, and lastly the passenger list was completed by a rather sad-looking man in an enormous rabbit-fur hat who did not have much to say for himself. He turned out to be a knife grinder with a wandering wife, who was off with any fellow who took her fancy -- several were mentioned -- only to return after six months, to be forgiven but to set off again at the drop of a hat. The husband consoled himself with tears and drink, but his soul was full of hate. Daudet remarks that if he were the knife-grinder's wife he would be watching his back.

Now we come back to the old miller, Maître Cornille, a relic from the time when all the windmills were kept busy grinding grain for the local farmers. When a steam-powered mill was set up and cornered all the trade, one by one the windmills gave up until only Maître Cornille's was left. He always seemed busy, but at last his secret was rumbled; he was only pretending to mill grain. His granddaughter, Vivette, a seventeen-year-old orphan who lived with him, fell in love with a local youth, whose father sought the old man's permission to marry, but he would have none of it. When the young couple arrived at the mill to plead their cause, the door was locked, but the miller had left his ladder outside. They decided to climb in through a window to see what was inside. Nothing! In fact the mill was empty. They were shocked, and reported back to their neighbours, whose consciences were pricked; as a result, they all began to bring their grain to Maître Cornille, and the mill was continuously busy until his death, when it fell silent for ever. Then twenty-plus years later it became Daudet's.

I doubt if goats talk, but according to Daudet one certainly did. It belonged to a M. Séguin, a farmer who had suffered losses to his livestock at the teeth of wolves up in the high pastures. After six goats had been eaten, he bought another and kept it in a paddock just behind his house. Such a beautiful goat, with such soft eyes, a little (pardon the word!) goatee beard, black shiny hooves, striped horns and long white hair that was like an overcoat for her. She wanted for nothing, but sadly craved excitement; the grass was greener up in the mountains. She began to grow thin and pale, her milk started to dry up. And so, one morning after milking, she turned to M. Séguin and said that she was bored where she was, and wanted to go up into the mountain. If the wolf attacked her, she would butt him with her horns. No amount of argument would dissuade her, so off she went, and had a grand time all day long. She met a troop of chamois, who

thought she was great, but towards evening the wind turned chill; she heard M. Séguin's horn calling far down the hillside, she thought about going back, but remembered the collar and the tether that she had always worn and decided to stay where she was. You can guess the rest!

I like very much the tale[iv] of the shepherd who spent the long summer up in the high pastures looking after his master's flocks. Once a fortnight a food convoy brought him supplies, and news of life back at the farm. An impressionable young man, he thought that the farmer's daughter, Stéphanette, was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. He regularly asked oblique questions about what she doing and whom she was seeing. One Sunday, he was awaiting his supplies and had to wait until very late in the day. He imagined all kinds of reasons for the delay, a storm blew up and there was heavy rain. At last he heard the tinkling of the bells on the mule's harness, and relief was at hand. But it wasn't the farm boy, nor was it Aunt Norade -- it was Stéphanette herself, in her Sunday best.[v] Our shepherd boy was overcome, but could not bring himself to declare his true feelings. Stéphanette packed up for the return journey, and set off. It was getting dark, when he heard her coming back, as she had been unable to cross a stream swollen by flood water. He did pretty well as an impromptu host, lighting a fire, making up a bed for her in the straw, but she could not sleep, and came back near the fire. The two huddled close together, and indulged in star-gazing. A shooting star coincided with a long cry that came from the lake far down below them. The shepherd lad told the girl that it was a soul entering Paradise. He then described the constellations until she fell asleep with her head on his shoulder, and he …. knew that for him the brightest star in the firmament had lost its way.

L'Arlésienne is a sad tale about the son of a farmer who kills himself for love … of a pretty young girl from the town, a bit of a flirt. Unbeknown to the farming family, she was promised to someone else, and had been his *maîtresse* (girl friend, rather than anything earthier, I think) for the previous two years. The truth comes out, but the young man pretends indifference, although he feels unable to bear the truth. He jumps to his death from a high window in the barn. His parents and his younger brother thereafter remain in deep mourning. It was this story that was dramatised, and gave rise to the suite of music by Bizet.

One cannot but be amused by the story of the Pope's mule, who had a remarkably long memory. It records the richly deserved come-uppance of Tistet Védène, a young lad who ingratiated himself into the Pope's household in Avignon in order to make his way up in the world. One should explain that the Pope was particularly fond of his mule, which every day received a generous bowl of *vin à la Française*[vi], a blend of Chateauneuf du Pape, lemon and sugar. As the Pope was getting old, Védène managed to take on the task of giving this tipple to the mule, although in fact the mule only got to smell it. Several of Védène's pals hid themselves in the straw of the stable, and saw off the drink, while the mule got and more aggrieved. The worst trick that they played on the poor animal was to lead it up the circular staircase of the bell tower of the church, and abandon it there. The next day, it took ropes, pulleys and a great deal of effort to lower the mule to the ground. Once on terra firma the beast had in mind to deliver his revenge by kicking out with his rear hooves, but he was frustrated because Védène was sent in a papal embassy to the queen of Naples and remained absent for seven years. He came back only to apply for a more elevated position in the Pope's household, got it, and turned up in the new raiment of the Pope's chief mustard-maker, to receive his seal of office. Unfortunately for him, the mule recognised him and delivered such a kick that Védène disappeared in a cloud of dust. That was the last of Tistet Védène.

I could go on for a long time, about the tales that are based in Corsica and Algiers and about Father Gaucher's Elixir[vii] but will content myself with only one more, that Daudet claimed to have read in a small book of poems and pleasant tales published (most appropriately for me) at Candlemas. It was about the Curé of Cucugnan, which is a town near the

Spanish border, not far from Perpignan. The good priest would have been perfectly content with his life, if only his parishioners were more mindful of the need for confession and attendance at church. So, one Sunday his sermon was very much to the point. He had dreamed that he went up to Heaven, where he was greeted by Saint Peter, of whom he asked how many of the parishioners from Cucugnan were inside. The answer was 'None'. Where might they be? Perhaps in purgatory… So he went there, and once again got the same negative answer. Where then? So off he went down to a wide open oven door with smoke and flames belching out. No books there, no need to enquire. All the people of Cucugnan were inside. At this point Abbé Martin told his parishioners that they must put themselves right with the Lord, beginning with the very next day. His timetable was strict: Monday, the old: Tuesday, the small infants: Wednesday, boys and girls: Thursday, men: Friday, women: and Saturday, the miller, because a day would scarcely be long enough for his confession.

We are back at the mill, trouble and all!

Writing this piece has given me the added pleasure of reading once more Daudet's charming little collection, and if any of you have a mind to do so, the French text is available online.[viii] It could be an interesting experience to have it translated into English by Babelfish.[ix] But what of the windmill itself? The truth is that no one mill is positively identified as Daudet's. Fontvieille has four windmills, all of which may have added something to his literary mill. It is inevitable that the local community should have sought to capitalise on the popularity of the stories. In 1935 the 'Friends of Alphonse Daudet' decided to restore one of the windmills in memory of the author, and they created a museum inside the building. Of the four mills, Ribet, Ramet, Sourdon and Tissot-Avon, it was Ribet, also known as St Pierre, that was chosen. It was fully restored and is the only one with sails. Some pictures help us to envisage the scene.

Walter Sargaison

Candlemas 2005

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[i] http://www.gloriana.nu/miller.html

[ii] ….. Un moulin à vent et à farine, sis dans la vallée du Rhône, au plein cœur de Provence, sur une côte boisée de pins et de chênes verts ; étant ledit moulin abandonné depuis plus de vingt années et hors d'état de moudre, comme il appert des vignes sauvages, mousses,

romarins, et autres verdures parasites qui lui grimpent jusqu'au bout des ailes….. (If you don't read French, ignore this!)

[iii] *Installation*

[iv] *Les Étoiles*

[v] The French word is '*endimanchée*' -- literally in her Sunday best.

[vi] http://frenchfood.about.com/od/frenchwine1/r/vinfranc.htm

[vii] *L'Elixir de Père Gaucher* (his name suggests a clumsy fellow, doesn't it?)

[viii] www.guipry.com/lire/daudet/installation.htm. There are several other sites to be found, including the Project Gutenberg.

9 http://www.babelfish.org/