

SIMON ROBERTS

The Bath & West

by Ian Jeffrey



The Royal Bath and West Show, Shepton Mallet, Somerset, 29 May 2008

There is evidence on show waiting for explanation. A sign says that those are *Grey Face Dartmoor* sheep in the foreground—a rare breed. Next to them are *Exmoor Horns* and *Dorset Downs*, which are not so rare. Those people in the foreground line up with their prize-winning sheep—probably for a parade of champions about to take place once the cattle are out of the way. There is a timeline of awards and parades on the final day. Somewhere off-stage there is a plan carefully considered in a back room, which is true of many of Simon

Roberts's scenes—especially the political events with their carefully staged informality.

On stage the actors don their costumes and play their parts. Chaperons wear white coats, for the sake of visibility but also as a gesture towards the science and care involved in breeding and presenting. Photographers in the middle distance try to do justice to a supreme champion in the company of a proud owner and a presenter of awards. Small crowds scattered along the fence in the distance look on. Inscriptions set the scene: *Exmoor Hall, Wiltshire County Council, Hi-Tec, and Celebrating Somerset*. There are banners and pavilions.

Those exhibitors in the foreground play leading roles in the event even if they only stand around. They wait for their turn on stage and talk amongst themselves. They can see the prize-giving and the distant procession. They are made up of family units along with youngsters and apprentice farmers. Generally they disregard their charges who drowse on their feet. It is important to the picture as a whole that the exhibitors are merely waiting, for it means that they interact. There are thirty-five of them or so and they talk of this and that as they wait. They bunch and spread—and form an extended crowd scene, the main feature of the picture.

The diagonal line of exhibitors looks like a set of notes on a stave. It makes up a complex, irregular shape—a frieze silhouetted against the darker ground—in contrast both to the group that clusters around the prize animals in the centre, and the regularly spaced parade in the background. The white line resists description, for it has three or four major intervals and some recurrent motifs, such as those made by the hemlines of the white coats. The blue signs constitute another formal theme. There are also halters, taut and slack, adding to the dynamics of the column. The sheep too play their part as horizontal markers. They establish another kind of underlying rhythm.

The white line looks like a monochrome frieze with coloured details on a dark background. It can also be read from right to left and back again. Read from left to right, intervals open up and forms become clearer. It is made up of three units in which the elements become increasingly distinct towards the lower right. It is as if the photographer had intended or identified musical possibilities in the showground. If the white frieze might be understood as a line of music developing in time, it is likely that the prize winners in the middle represent something like an explosion of sound. Beyond them, in the prudent parade of cattle, there is a return to a more measured normality, in contrast to the onlookers beyond the railings who look like deposits of gravel on the edge of a stream. All the strata on show, from the white line in the foreground to the

billowing trees and the dreamy sky, have what might be thought of as different time signatures, a different flow and pace.

Simon Roberts's subject in this instance is Britain. There are place names to prove it: Exmoor, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Dartmoor. And those are British animals with a certain way of moving and occupying space. It is a British scene in every respect. But at the same time, it is not assertively British. What attracts Roberts over and over again is a recognisable look embodied in intervals and gestures. People keep their distance, even if it is hard to say exactly what that distance is. They have certain ways of conversing, and in the white line there are examples of conversation that look typical. But only comparative scans of the same event over the years might give anything like a reliable reading. In the meantime, what the photographer and his audience are left with are intuitions that what is shown is significant. It can be sensed but not certified. It is as if photography makes a promise that can never be fulfilled. You feel, though, that with an extra effort you might finally get the wavelength, or see through appearances, and find that underlying ratio or local key.

Once upon a time, circa 1945, we looked for this kind of embodiment in expressive individuals and in small groups of characters that could be read like figures in an engraving. Today, as Simon Roberts' photographs convey, this idea of collective character has been dispersed and has to be looked for amongst the crowd and on its edges, taking in distracted passers-by and others lost in thought. One of the virtues of this picture, taken at the Royal Bath and West agricultural show, is that it is constructed as an aid to thought. It is an organised introduction to the problem—with comparative material. The white frieze, so rich in variations, exists in relation to the clusters around the brown cattle, and then again in contrast to the formalized procession. It is presented, too, as a world or as part of one, topped by that drifting cloudscape and the fringe of trees like a tide moving to the right above the harder geometry of roofs and gables. As a segment of a wider world criss-crossed by trails and processions, it asks and deserves to be considered. Its incidentals lead you in, especially those names so artfully disclosed, which can be read and even researched as you try unconsciously to get the measure of the key and the ratios—the truth that lies in a relationship between the parts.