

Common Understanding: The Commons in Literature

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Abstract:

In general academic circles, the concept of commons is either completely unknown or familiar only as Hardin's much-cited tragedy of the commons. Trying to explain "commons" to academic colleagues requires a lengthy conversation, and non-academics are even less knowledgeable. One hypothesis to explain this lack of familiarity is that although both fiction and creative non-fiction English (British and American) literature is often a vehicle for public understanding of political, social, and cultural contexts, the commons are rarely portrayed in either. When commons are portrayed, they are usually in the context of decline (fisheries) or conflict (enclosure). To test this hypothesis, relevant literature was identified by three methods. First, standard academic data bases were searched. Second, members of several academic associations were queried through the listservs about appropriate sources. Finally, academic colleagues were asked for suggestions. This process produced twenty-nine possible sources (books and authors). I looked at all of these and read most; seventeen proved relevant. The relevant sources were divided into four categories: commons throughout; commons as essential literary factors, commons in passing, and utopias. Only one reading fit "commons throughout," and two other readings dealt with commons in a substantial fashion. The search process confirmed a scarcity of literary portrayals of commons. Three possible explanations for this lack are the absence of enough conflict in sustainable CPR institutions to generate compelling plot lines; the success of enclosure advocates in defining commoners as lazy, ignorant peasants; and confusion of open-access systems with commons systems.

Keywords: *commons, literature, poetry*

1. INTRODUCTION

For over a quarter of a century, I have been trying to explain the term "commons" to a variety of audiences: family, neighbors, academic colleagues, even strangers on airplanes. Some briefly contemplate the lower house of the British Parliament; others connect to the Boston Common or village commons in general; a few (especially academics) nod sagely and start discussing open-access resources. The only venues in which I can discuss commons without conversation-numbing explanations are the Workshop at Indiana University and IASC meetings. Why is it that a topic of such deep interest to a multi-disciplinary array of scholars and practitioners is unknown in public discourse? One hypothesis to explain this lack of familiarity is that although both fiction

and creative non-fiction English (British and American) literature¹ is often a vehicle for public understanding of political, social, and cultural contexts, the commons are rarely portrayed in either. If this is true, we lack literary, cultural referents for the concept of “commons”: there are no canonical or popular books to acquaint people with the idea. Couple this to the wide acceptance of Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons” thesis, and we have ideal circumstances for misunderstanding and confusion. In this paper, I examine seventeen possible literary sources in pursuit of cultural referents for “commons.”

2. METHODOLOGY

In addition to my own rather eclectic reading habits, I used three methods to locate appropriate sources: traditional library databases, inquiries to listservs of appropriate academic associations, and direct queries to academic colleagues. Obviously these three methods are not a comprehensive or even systematic examination of possible sources. However, because I was looking for canonical or popular works, it is reasonable to expect scholars in environmental literature and environmental history to be familiar with those sources.

I limited the search to Anglophone literature, but I cast my temporal net wide. I was interested in any fiction or creative non-fiction work, including poetry, that dealt directly with commons.

2.1. *Library databases: MLA (Modern Language Association) Bibliography; PAIS International; library catalog “subject” searches*

For this search I worked with the literature reference librarian at my university. Even with her enthusiastic assistance, this was the least useful mechanism for identifying books. The Digital Library of the Commons does not include fiction and creative non-fiction; neither do the search engines for biology, natural resources, natural resource management, political science, or public affairs. Literature databases do not index books under any terms likely to identify books about the commons. For example, *Captains Courageous* (Kipling 1982 [1897]) which I knew contained some commons fishery issues is indexed as the following: “saltwater fishing - New England - Fiction” and “Fishers - New England - Fiction.” Searching under those terms produced hundreds of useless sources. The best book I read for this project, *Mayordomo* (1988), did not show up on any of my database searches. It is indexed as “Irrigation water - New Mexico - Management.”

¹It took me a while to get a clear fix on “creative non-fiction.” I had always defined “fiction” as made-up and “non-fiction” as true, so creativity seemed out of place in non-fiction. In the world of environmental literature, “creative non-fiction” is non-fiction plus artistic license. For example, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Dillard moved events around to make the story line more compelling, and she admits to making a few things up. Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* (1949) is another example of creative non-fiction.

2.2. Academic listservs: Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) and American Society for Environmental History (ASEH)

Here is how I explained what I was looking for to my listserv colleagues:

I'm working on a paper on the way common pool resource (CPR) management institutions are portrayed in literature, and I could really use some suggestions for sources.

What, you may ask, is a CPR management institution? CPRs are natural or man-made resources to which a defined set of people have access, and the management institution is the system of rules that govern access to and use of the resources. Examples are medieval English commons, communal forests in Switzerland, inshore Maine lobster fisheries, the ferry system in Cornwall that takes tours to St. Michael's Mount, the New Forest in Hampshire, and the community swimming pool in an apartment complex. I'm trying to find examples in both fiction and creative non-fiction that incorporate CPRs as either a plot issue or as setting. [A list of already identified books followed.]

These requests produced fourteen possibilities for books and authors. The respondents were thoughtful and often suggested works they knew didn't quite fit the CPR definition but that had tangential value.

2.3. Direct appeals to academic colleagues

I also used academic networking with the English faculty on my campus. I found one who has written on relevant British literature (Wallace 1993). She pointed me to the work of John Clare (1967), an early eighteenth century farmer who wrote beautiful poetry about rural England during enclosure. Altogether, my kind colleagues suggested fifteen authors, poems, and books.

3. RESULTS

As a consequence of this research, I read twenty-six books, numerous poems, and supporting books and articles in my search for the commons in literature. The relevant ones are annotated below (4. ANNOTATIONS).³ I considered several ways to sort the readings: by genre (Western, science fiction, historical, etc.), chronology, geography, or

²Anne Wallace is the author of *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: the Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Wallace 1993): This is a wonderful book about poetry (Wordsworth, Cowper, Clare, and others) and the meaning of walking as an expression of political and cultural values as well as a symbol of reflection and creativity. It is also about footpaths and public highways as commons, a story that is still current in British political issues with the new countryside access rules.

³Materials that I read but did not select include *The Pioneers* (James Fenimore Cooper, 1823), *Earth* (David Brin, 1990), *Milagro Beanfield War* (John Nichols, 1971), and "The Deserted Village" (Oliver Goldsmith, 1770). I would be delighted to receive suggestions for further reading.

subject matter (New Forest, fisheries, enclosure, etc.) or by the research categories of fiction and creative non-fiction. However, I chose none of these schemes and instead have sorted the books into four categories. They are ranked according to the level of explicit engagement with commons management, society, and culture: commons throughout, commons as essential factor, commons in passing, and utopias.

Commons throughout

Mayordomo (Crawford 1988)

Commons as Essential Factor

Condominium (MacDonald 1977)

The Forest (Rutherford 2000)

“The Mores [sic],” “The Cottager,” and “Remembrances” (Clare, 1967)

Commons in Passing

As You Like It (Shakespeare 1852 [c. 1600])

Buffalo Commons (Wheeler 1998)

Captains Courageous (Kipling 1982 [1897])

Children of the New Forest (Marryat 1930)

Emma (Austen 1982 [1816])

Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South (Kirby 2006)

New Forest, 3 vol. (Smith 1829)

Utah Blaine (L'Amour 1981 [1954])

Utopias

Blithedale Romance (Hawthorne 2004 [1852])

Ecotopia and *Ecotopia Emerging* (Callenbach 1975, 1984)

Looking Backward, 2000-1887 (Bellamy 1969 [1888])

Utopia (More 1975 [1516])

4. ANNOTATIONS

4.1. Commons throughout

Mayordomo (Crawford 1988): Crawford was the ditch manager (mayordomo) of a community irrigation ditch in Northern New Mexico in the 1980s. This superb book follows him through a year of negotiations, community meetings, work assignments, recalcitrant members, and backbreaking work to keep the Acequia de la Jara functioning as an irrigation ditch and as a community. Winner of the 1988 Western States Book Award for Creative Nonfiction, it is the only book I found that is commons all the way through. It is thick description (Geertz 1973) of a contemporary commons.

4.2. Commons as Essential Factor

Condominium (MacDonald 1977): The frame for this story is over-development in

Florida's coastal areas compounded by a corrupt and poorly regulated construction industry that built below-code buildings. The plot revolves around the residents of the Golden Sands condominium who are obviously going to suffer when the inevitable hurricane hits. The condominium owners and their Association are constrained by their purchase contracts; Roberts Rules of Order regulates their debates (204-222); and sanctions are imposed internally as well as by outside forces such as the management contract. There is not much discussion of common spaces beyond a small reference to the swimming pool, but the book is one of the few to address urban commons.

The Forest (Rutherford 2000): This is a James Michener type of novel: Rutherford follows the fortunes of several families in the New Forest (Hampshire, England) from 1099 to 2000. The discussions of the common rights is extensive but is overwhelmed by the 598-page text. Notable discussions:

- * Common rights in the Forest left in place by William the Conqueror in 1099 (14);
- * How copyholders (commoners) engage in poaching, enlarging their private holdings and other violations, despite heavy penalties (15);
- * New limits on the king's power in the forest under Magna Carta in 1215, and the Charter of the Forest in 1217 clarified the relationship between the crown and the copyholders (93);
- * Regular court of the New Forest in 1295: how it was organized, and how it actually operated; penalties for cheating were milder under the new regime (120); some encroachments are fined so regularly "that they were, in effect, rents paid for illegal tenancy" (121; see also Tubbs 1968, 73);
- * In 1635, the King ordered a Forest Eyre – the first in a century – to inspect land uses in the Forest and to collect fines (302);
- * Later the King required each landowner to record the common rights (pasture, turbary, mast, and estover) held by landowners and tenants (300); this was really a survey so he could use the assets as collateral for a loan (300, 303-304); bad consequences resulted for one commoner who refused to record his traditional rights (338);
- * In 1851, Parliament moves to begin enclosure of the New Forest (553-544) but is eventually foiled (560-571).

"The Mores," "The Cottager," and "Remembrances" (Clare, 1967): John Clare was born in 1793 in a small village in Northamptonshire, England, and died in an insane asylum in 1864. Happily for Clare, his asylum was a kind place where he was treated well and allowed to walk about the countryside (Clare 1967, xxxi). His first book of poetry was published in 1820 and his last in 1835, but he was a prolific writer his entire life (Clare, xiii-xxxv). His best-known pastoral poem is "The Mores." Wallace (1993, 112-114) rightly sees this as a complaint against restriction of walking paths but it is also about the harm done by enclosure:

Inclosure came and trampled on the grave

of labours rights and left the poor a slave
And memorys pride ere want to wealth did bow
Is both the shadow and the substance now.
(Clare, 170).

“The Cottager” celebrates simple, honest villagers:

And thus he lives too happy to be poor
While strife neer pauses at so mean a door
Low in the sheltered valley stands his cot
He hears the mountain stream and feels it not
Winter and spring toil ceasing ere tis dark
Rests with the lamb and rises with the lark
(Clare, 30)

Finally, from “Remembrances” in which Clare is writing about “mouldiwarps” [moles]⁴, **he is actually lamenting the costs of enclosure:**

**Here was commons for their hills where they seek for freedom still
Though every commons gone and though traps are set to kill
These little homeless miners – O it turns my bosom chill
When I think of old ‘sneap green’ puddocks* nook and hilly snow (* kite
[bird])
Where bramble bushes grew and the daisy gemmed in dew
And the hills of silken grass like to cushions on the view
Where we threw the pismire** crumbs when we’d nothing else to do (** ant)
All leveled like a desert by the never weary plow
All banished like the sun where that cloud is passing now
And settled her for ever on its brow
....
Inclosure like a buonaparte let not a thing remain
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill
And hung the moles for traitor – though the brook is running still
It runs a naked stream cold and chill.
(Clare, 175-176).**

4.3. Commons in Passing

⁴One of the pleasures of this sort of research is finding unexpected literary connections. I’m a fan of John Buchan’s espionage books, the most famous of which is *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. In the following excerpt from *Mr. Standfast*, Hannay has been talking with an old Highlander: “He was not thinking about the land itself, but about the men who had been driven from it fifty years before. His desire was not for reform, but for restitution, and that was past the power of any government. I went to bed in the loft in a sad, reflective mood, considering how speeding our new-fangled plough we must break down a multitude of molehills and how desirable and unreplaceable was the life of the moles” (Buchan 1919, 104) It seems probable that Buchan had read John Clare.

***As You Like It* (Shakespeare 1852 [c. 1600]):** In the Forest of Arden, all social distinctions seem to evaporate. Corin the Shepherd says “Sir, I am a true labourer; I earn that I eat, get that I wear; owe no man hate, envy no man’s happiness, glad of other men’s good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is, [sic] to see my ewes graze, and my lambs suck.” Act III, Scene II (Shakespeare 1852, 214).

***Buffalo Commons* (Wheeler 1998):** This is a fictional account of the efforts of a wealthy philanthropist to create the Buffalo Commons⁵ in the northern plains and of the opposition he faces from one ranching family. The preserve would be created from a combination of federal, state, and private land, and the ranchers want to preserve their family land and traditions. Despite the title, there is little of interest for commons scholars in this book.

***Captains Courageous* (Kipling 1982 [1897]):** One of Kipling’s few American books, *Captains Courageous* is the tale of a spoiled rich boy who falls off an ocean liner and is picked up by the crew of a small fishing vessel out of Gloucester, Massachusetts. After serving on the schooner for the summer, Harvey Cheyne learns the value of hard work and is returned to his parents an improved boy. There are only two notable instances of fishing community rules in the book. The first is in the “town,” a close assembly of boats on the Virgin Shoals off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland:

Bank law strictly forbids more than one hook on one line when the dories are in the Virgin or the Eastern Shoals; but so close lay the boats that even single hooks snarled, and Harvey found himself in hot argument with a gentle hairy Newfoundlander on one side and a howling Portuguese on the other (446).

The second also occurs in “town” when a man who had broken the rules appears after an extended absence:

Then they discovered a man from a Truro boat who, six years before, had been convicted of using a tackle with five or six hooks – a “scrowger,” they call it – on the Shoals.... although he had hidden himself on the Georges [Bank] ever since, he found his honors waiting for him full blown. They took it up in a sort of firecracker chorus: “Jim! O Jim! O Jim! Sssscrowger Jim!” That pleased everybody. (447)

***Children of the New Forest* (Marryat 1930 [1847]):** This book is set in the same time frame covered in pages 296-349 in *The Forest* [above]; Rutherford condemns its “numerous technical errors” (Rutherford, 556). When Cavalier Colonel Beverley is killed by Cromwell’s men, and his home is burned down, old Jacob Armitage, a forester,

⁵The Buffalo Commons is a real-life project to restore the Great Plains of the American West; it was initially proposed by Deborah Popper and Frank Popper. See F. Williams, 2001.

protects in the four Beverley children by taking them in and raising them as foresters. Most of the book is a *Swiss Family Robinson*-style adventure as the children learn how to live off the Forest, but there is very little about Forest practices. However, my 1930 edition version of the book was edited to remove “tough and sinewy historical facts” and the “dry and scholarly opening” (ix), so there would be “fewer obstacles in the shape of unnecessary facts and needless repetitions” (ix-x); good commons issues may have been eliminated during editing.

Emma (Austen 1982 [1816]): I read this because of a reference in Wallace (1993, 115). When Mr. Knightly considers moving a footpath to avoid cutting through a field, he says “I should not attempt it, if it were to be the means of inconvenience to the Highbury [village] people....” (Austen, 50). Wallace writes that he is “exhibiting an admirable and unusual sensitivity to the old common rights of the villagers” (115). Of course, *Emma* is a novel of manners and Austen is not concerned at all with social changes in the lower classes (Williams, R. 1973, 113). That is the only commons reference in the book, but I worked so long to find it, and *Emma* is so annoying, that I couldn't bear to leave it out.

Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South (Kirby 2006): This book is only marginally an example of creative non-fiction, but it has a number of references to commons, and it is a wonderful book. Kirby sees the Appalachian Trail as a commons by virtue of its “cooperatively maintained rest stops and camps” (154). It is a new commons (“a fine one in the MacKayeian ideal” [155]), layered over the old Southern community use of the mountain lands. The entire third chapter (113-155) is titled “Commoners and the Commons,” but he is really writing about “open range” (121) use of public lands for swine and other livestock.

The New Forest, 3 vol. (Smith 1829): More a novel of class and improbable coincidences, this is set in a town near the New Forest to allow the action to cover everything from sightseeing excursions to smuggling. The “Captain” of the smugglers has, of course, a beautiful daughter and follows his own code of chivalry. The common folk are viewed by the gentry as uneducated louts, while the louts themselves frequently outsmart the gentry. In Volume II, the story of the village fair echoes the Swing riots over the English enclosures (see Neeson, 277-281). There are a few references to commoners rights: the miser who owns the local mansion receives “[f]ines, fees, and heriots; quit rents; timber-account; agistment of cattle; ... demesne account” (Vol . II, p. 17) and “[T]he forest borderers had a right, at this period, to turn in their hogs [to graze in the Forest], on paying a trifle to the steward's court at Lyndhurst;...” (Vol. III, p. 132). Despite being set in a famous common, this has no value as a book on the commons, but it is an enjoyable read.

Utah Blaine (L'Amour 1981 [1954]): Utah Blaine is a typical L'Amour hero: broad-shouldered, slim-hipped, notoriously fast on the draw, and imbued with a strong sense of morality and fair play. In this novel, Blaine is drawn into a battle over range rights on an open-access ranges. Ranchers have staked out territory on the first come, first

served rule. In theory, the land was theirs as long as they used it (an echo of Western water law of prior appropriation). In practice, neighboring ranchers encroached on weaker ranchers' land and rustled their cattle. In this book, the weaker ranchers are eliminated by their unscrupulous neighbors by lynching. Blaine rescues one and fights to save his ranch from evil, lawless men, gaining the rancher's beautiful daughter in the process. Blaine wins in the end but his victory has to be confirmed by the government. The finale echoes Locke and Hardin:

"Country's growin', Angie," he whispered, "growin' up. Maybe this was the last big fight. Maybe the only way men can end violence is by violence, but I think there are other ways."

"They are setting up a city government in Red Creek," Angie said. "All of them are together."

"That's the way. Government. We all need it, Angie." He was silent.

"Government with justice... sometimes the words sound so...so damn stuffy, but it's what men have to live by if they will live in peace." (L'Amour 1954, 196)

4.4. *Utopias*

I was astonished by the number of suggestions that utopian novels would be examples of a commons. Without trying to make too much of the four utopian novels suggested by humanities scholars (five if we count *Ecotopia Emerging*), equating utopian communities – impractical, unsustainable, unconventional, and culturally suspect – with "commons" is an example of the problem I have confronted for the past twenty-five years. Although the four here are of no practical interest for understanding the commons, I have included them as examples of how some modern scholars conceptualize "commons."

Blithedale Romance (Hawthorne 2004 [1852]): The frame for this story is the plan to establish a commune of sorts in New England, presumably a day's ride from Boston. Four men and four women, assisted by a gruff handyman, form the community, and other than segregating tasks by traditional gender roles, there is neither organization nor apparent rules for work. They have a "constitution" but it is only mentioned once in the narrative ("We did not greatly care – at least, I never did – for the written constitution under which our millennium had commenced" [46].) Any student of commons regimes would know at once that this project was doomed. However, the story is not about the commune; it is a tale of unrequited love, passion, and intrigue that ends, predictably, in melodramatic death.

Ecotopia and ***Ecotopia Emerging*** (Callenbach 1975, 1984): In *Ecotopia*, the Pacific Northwest has seceded from the United States. The new nation is a hippie environmentalist's dream: public transportation, local and organic food, and free love. The story frame is that the author is the first American reporter allowed into Ecotopia; he records his thoughts for publication and in his own journal. Callenbach spent a great deal of time working out all the institutional arrangements from education to civil

defense, but, like *Looking Backward* (below), the purpose of the book is to advance a social ideology rather than to entertain a reader. *Ecotopia Emerging* is the prequel to *Ecotopia* and explains the origin of the new nation. In this book, a young girl invents a cheap and simple mechanism to produce solar power. She and her family thwart plots by the energy industry and government to steal her invention. They eventually join forces with a group of “cancer commandos” (people dying of cancer who are willing to sacrifice their lives for environmental issues), and by the end of the book, Ecotopia has become an independent state.

Looking Backward, 2000-1887 (Bellamy 1969 [1888]): *Looking Backward* has a remarkable concept for 1888 (“Rip Van Winkle,” written in 1819, has a similar conceit, although Rip sleeps for only twenty years). The hero falls into a form of suspended animation in 1887 and awakens in 2000 to a strictly regimented socialist world where corporatism has been destroyed. It is an extremely didactic text relieved only slightly by a coincidental romance between the hero and the granddaughter of the love he lost a hundred years before.

Utopia (More 1975 [1516]): In the only real nod to commons issues among these books, More provides justification for his new society by criticizing the old:

Now [your sheep] are becoming so greedy and wild that they devour men themselves, as I hear. They devastate and pillage fields, houses, and towns.... [The rich] leave no land free for the plow: they enclose every acre for pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns, keeping only the churches, and those for sheep-barns.... Thus one greedy, insatiable glutton ... may enclose many thousand acres of land within a single hedge. The tenants are dismissed and compelled, by trickery or brute force or constant harassment, to sell their belongings.... They leave the only homes familiar to them, and they can find no place to go. (More 1975, 12)

Although his new society does not reflect a return to the old ways, this is a thorough condemnation of the social changes in the sixteenth century. The other utopian novels follow his model of detailing the organization of their new societies but they are basing their critiques on different dysfunctional systems.

5. DISCUSSION

Of the seventeen works that address the commons in any noticeable fashion, only one (*Mayordomo*) would provide a clear understanding of CPR management. While it is a superb book, it is out of print, non-fiction, and overtly about the American West (a factor which usually reduces a book’s appeal east of the Rockies). In the second category, “commons as essential factors,” *Condominium* has long, useful passages about community management, but it is primarily about deadly hurricanes, shoddy construction, steamy sex, and greed on the Florida coast. *The Forest* (598 pages) has

clear discussions of how the New Forest commons operated and evolved, but most readers will be primarily interested in the intricate family stories and will skim the legal history portions. Both MacDonald and Rutherford are successful popular writers: MacDonald follows a similar format in most of his books, and Rutherford has a devoted following for his historical epics. However, neither is so popular that one could abbreviate a long explanation of “commons” by saying, “Well, haven’t you read *Condominium*?”⁶ **John Clare’s poems are beautiful and passionate, but he is a minor poet and not read often. My hypothesis that the working commons are rarely portrayed in either fiction or creative non-fiction is tentatively confirmed.**

Why are sustainable commons rarely portrayed in English literature? I can think of three possibilities: absence of enough conflict in sustainable CPR institutions to generate compelling plot lines; the success of enclosure advocates in defining commoners as lazy, ignorant peasants; and confusion of open-access systems with commons systems.

First, from the writer’s point of view, a sustainable commons management system lacks excitement. Of the books discussed here, only *Mayordomo* and *The Forest* have managed to overcome this challenge. Good stories have both character, structure, plot and setting (James 2002, 7). Plot drives the story; it is what keeps the reader turning pages. Setting is the context for the plot: a New Mexico irrigation ditch or England’s New Forest. Plot evolves from conflict, and setting is one of the most common ways to provide conflict. *Mayordomo* is creative non-fiction, so it does not have a plot in the same sense as *The Forest* or *Condominium*. However, the story line follows the seasons, so we have chronology and expectation of action. The structure of Crawford’s story develops as the water supply and demand fluctuate with the seasons, young men are reluctant to commit to the hard work of ditch maintenance, and tension builds between the older Hispanic farmers and the young Anglo they have elected to run the irrigation system.

From a literary viewpoint, sustainable CPRs require too much work if they are merely setting. *The Forest* is an exception because the frame of the story is the evolution of the forest management system; like Michener, Rutherford has made geologic time scale the hallmark of his writing career. In *The Forest*, Rutherford gets past the long peaceful periods by inventing a feud between two forest families, but he still has to make long diversions into English history and law to carry the story. Even I found my eyes glazing over when yet another Act of Parliament was passed to restrict the foresters’ rights. I am, of course, making a circular argument: writers don’t use commons because no one, including writers, understands them, and it’s too much work to explain them, but we don’t understand commons because writers don’t take the trouble to write about them.

⁶In contrast, you probably could explain self-important bureaucrats to teenagers if you mentioned the Ministry of Magic from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series.

The bottom line is that, in general, sustainable commons don't sell books. Enclosure and the problems of industrialization make better settings for strong plots.

Second, in popular imagination, English commoners are ignorant oafs trudging through muck and living on coarse bread and ale. Despite the many books written about common field management, the facts about common life and commoners are vague and in dispute (Neeson 1992, 17). The historical record on English commons management is fragmentary, and once enclosure began, the political spin of the landlords was that commoners were insubordinate, lazy "peasants" living the poor, nasty, brutish, and short lives made famous by Hobbes. Enclosure was touted as improvement for the commoners who would have opportunity for wage labor. Of course, cheap wage labor was more an advantage for the enclosers; it would "end commoner's relative wage-independence and make agricultural labour necessary" (Neeson, 29). As in war, the victors wrote the history, and the valuable social structure, interdependence, and leisure time of commoners became inconsequential (Neeson 1993, 41; see also Neeson 1984). Once this view of the rural classes was accepted, the public impression of the system under which they had lived was unpleasant, and, as sustainable commons were both sordid and obscure, they are rarely a source for popular literature.⁸

Finally, most people confuse "open access" and "commons," and what's worse, in doing so they think they understand commons. In everyday language, the word "commons" has come to mean a variety of systems such as open access, public lands, and atmospheric pollution sinks as well as the traditional understanding. Popular writers may not even aware that such systems exist; my request for sources for this paper led one person to respond: "Wow. I had no idea there was a formal name for this kind of thing!"

The purpose of this paper was to answer a simple question: why do so few people understand the concept of "commons"? My hypothesis was that one explanation is that commons are rarely portrayed in canonical or popular fiction or creative non-fiction. I found no canonical works on commons. One book, *Mayordomo*, won a literary prize but is not widely known, and two of the "commons as essential factors" books are written by popular but formulaic

⁷Neeson is concerned with the politics and sociology of enclosure from the villagers' point of view. Until I read this book, I had not grasped how the politicians and upper class writers had spun the enclosure story, depicting villagers as lazy peasants unwilling to do an honest day's labor. She looks at the political economy of commons life in a remarkable lucid work.

⁸When the romanticisation of the Highlands began during Victorian times, Scottish clansmen became noble fellows, and novels about CPR systems gained public approval. However, the fictional portrayals by Sir Walter Scott and others were hardly accurate. The effects of the Highland Clearances are shown more accurately in the works of modern Scottish authors such as Neil Gunn (for example, *The Silver Darlings*, 1941).

authors. Couple this to the wide acceptance of Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" thesis, and we have ideal circumstances for misunderstanding and confusion.

The importance of such obscurity for CPR management institutions seems obvious. If contemporary writers are not aware of commons, they can hardly be expected to use them in their work. If only a relatively small number of us are aware of the commons framework, and if we must engage in a lengthy education process just to explain what it is, then we are less likely to succeed with proposals to use a commons framework to resolve current resource dilemmas or to design new, effective regimes.

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