

Ancient muses and milking cows

East Devon author and farmer, **Jill Dudley**, talks to **Fergus Byrne** about a life of Greek Gods, divine inspiration and dairy cows.

Publishing her latest book at 93, East Devon author and farmer Jill Dudley recalls an extraordinary life of international quests, agricultural adventures, near-death experiences, and a surprising passion for ancient Greece, all while navigating the unscripted realities of farm life with unwavering spirit, and perhaps a touch of divine imagination.

Speaking from her home near Stockland Jill explains that when she first got married she wanted to make some money so thought she would write a drama. That was in the 1950s when a girl was not expected to have a career, but to go to dances and balls and find an eligible husband. She lived in London and her father worked in the city. As she says, life was comparatively easy for girls then; certainly she enjoyed herself.

While her husband went to his office—he worked in the Iraq Petroleum Company and was an oil executive, which sounded good—she thought she would supplement his income by writing. She decided to write plays as she thought dialogue would be easier than prose. She had beginner's luck with a comedy which was accepted by Curtis Brown, a leading literary agent, and was produced by the Leatherhead Repetory Company and received a good write up in the Times. Unfortunately, she never saw it staged because by then she was living in Iraq and had just given birth to a daughter.

Things in Iraq were in a bad state. There was an army coup and the monarchy was abolished. Jill's husband Robert was made redundant and they came back to England. For several years they lived in the



north of Scotland and helped with a cheese-making enterprise which Robert's sister and husband had just started. But at the time it was not a viable business and often Robert was not paid. However, whilst there they met another young family and the father was going down to Cirencester Agricultural College to learn how to manage his father-in-law's five thousand acre estate near Perth. This gave Robert the idea of becoming a farmer. 'As long as you don't expect me to be your farm labourer!' was Jill's first remark. 'Of course not, I wouldn't dream of it!' replied Robert.

Jill says that any farmer's wife knows that there are times, for instance, when she has to help—in rounding up escaped cows, or with a difficult calving. They bought a dairy farm with a hefty mortgage because at the time Robert had 7,000 pounds (not the 30,000 he was told he would need). He was extremely courageous but, as Jill says (and all that knew him remarked) he always smiled. 'Of course I had to help,' Jill admits. 'When he didn't finish milking and came in at eleven at night, which meant he wanted to sleep on, I found it easier to get up at six, bring in the cows and get the milking parlour ready.' She would do the same for the evening milking, washing down the yard and dairy afterwards, and feeding the calves. 'There were always a mass of chores to be done on the farm which Robert had to sort out—always smiling!'

There were of course near-death dramas which luckily were never fatal, 'but which prompted me to imagine there was a guardian angel watching over us. This is what made me think of the Goddess Muck living on the Beacon Hill behind our farm, keeping an eye on us.' There was the occasion when Robert's leg was trapped above his head between the metal back to the hay trailer and the girder to the haybarn which Jill just managed to release using a metal-handled shovel; or the occasion she was in a cowshed during a blizzard when there was no electricity, crouched between two cows hand-milking one when the one next door kicked and sent her sprawling backwards, and she thought she had broken her back which



Jill and Robert at the Caledonian Ball in London
© Jill Dudley

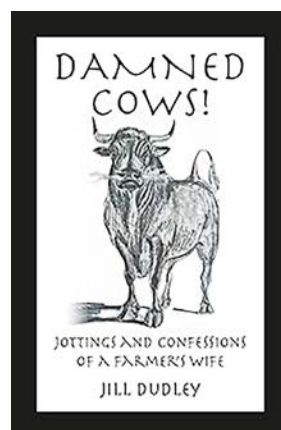
luckily was only bruised.

The word "goddess" led Jill to imagine the Greek gods. She doesn't know what prompted her to want to learn Greek, but she enrolled in a Greek language course at Exeter University. There she met Greek enthusiasts who'd visited Greece and this in turn made her want to visit the country. The result were her books *Ye Gods!* and *Lap of the Gods* which in turn led to her *Put it in Your Pocket* series about the Greek sacred sites, the islands and early drama.

'I'm always busy,' Jill admits, 'because when I'm not writing, I'm selling my work. Luckily, Gardners Book Distributors have my books so they are available from Waterstones, Blackwells and all bookshops.

I'm very lucky, and feel I've led a charmed life. For this I can only thank my husband Robert, who tolerated all my foibles and kept smiling!'

The photo of Jill sitting on a swing was taken on her 93rd birthday. It hangs from a Scots pine at the top of a hill behind the farm which Jill has always thought of as a very special place—holy is the word she uses for it. It was there that Robert's funeral took place and his ashes were scattered. From the swing, if you go high enough you can see over the hedges to Axminster some four miles away.



Jill Dudley's latest book 'Damned Cows! Jottings and Confessions of a Farmer's Wife' is available from Archway Bookshop in Axminster, Paragon Books in Sidmouth and all good bookshops. ISBN: 9781-0686883-1-7.

For more information about Jill's books visit: www.orpingtonpublishers.co.uk/