

'PLENTY' AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

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"The delusion is that cheapness leads to plenty. But of what use is plenty of rubbish?" (Northbourne, 1940, p.66).

"The illusion of plenty" and "poverty in plenty" are notions that Lord Northbourne raised in his manifesto of organic agriculture, *Look to the Land* (1940, p.73). At the launch of this new journal, *Plenty*, it is timely to revisit Northbourne's reflections on the topic.

In the current epidemic of obesity, where 25% of Australians, 23% of British, and 34% of Americans are obese (OECD, 2011), we witness the manifestations of Northbourne's notions of "the illusion of plenty" and "poverty in plenty". We live in a time when the super obese may be extricated from their homes by a demolition team knocking down walls (McCann, 2013), may be transported to hospital in specially reinforced fat-mobile ambulances (Osborne, 2013), and may be CT scanned in machines that are otherwise used for large zoo animals (Hope, 2012). Such developments are a wakeup call that perhaps all is not well amidst the prevailing feast of food.

For the present century, Northbourne could be paraphrased in modern parlance as: "The delusion is that cheapness leads to plenty. But of what use is plenty of junk food?" His book, *Look to the Land*, introduced to the world the concept of "organic farming" (Paull, 2006). It is a book of the philosophy of organic agriculture rather than of the mechanics of organic agriculture, it is a testament to the 'why' rather than of the 'how'.

In his book, Northbourne laid down the foundational philosophy of organic farming. As well as philosopher of organics, he was also a practitioner, and a biodynamic farmer. He observed that: "the 'biodynamic method', evolved in accordance with the recommendations of the late Dr Rudolf Steiner. The ... method has been highly developed in the course of some fifteen years' work on the Continent, and its effectiveness may be said to be proved, though its supporters would be the last to claim that there is no more to be learnt about it" (p.173).

Although Northbourne (1896-1982) and Steiner (1865-1925) were at Oxford at the same time, Northbourne as a young university lecturer in

agriculture in 1922, and Steiner presiding over his conference on education (Paull, 2011b), there is no evidence that they met. The biodynamics advocate Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961) and Northbourne met in both England and Switzerland. Northbourne was impressed with Pfeiffer's book, *Bio-dynamic Farming and Gardening* (1938), and he invited Pfeiffer to present a biodynamic conference at Northbourne's farm in Kent, which Pfeiffer did in 1939, just before the outbreak of WWII (Paull, 2011a).

The following year, Northbourne's book, *Look to the Land*, presented the arguments and ideas for a differentiated agriculture to an Anglophone audience at a time when such ideas, in a Germanic configuration, would have been less likely to meet a receptive audience.

Northbourne lamented that "qualitative deterioration is evident all around us ... Not only in food" (p.66). He declared that: "we have plenty - in the quantitative sense only - of food; but in the kind of food which is the absolutely indispensable basis for satisfactory living we are miserably poor" (p.73).

In *Look to the Land*, Northbourne raised many issues that remain contemporary and compelling today, and he wrote of them with great clarity and robustness. A selection reveals the prescience and farsightedness of Northbourne's thoughts:

FOOD

"We must remember that food of better quality is food which has vitality, individuality, freshness; food which is grown right, not only food that looks right; food which is effective as a vehicle of life and is not either mere stimulant or mere filling" (Northbourne, 1940, p.129).

OBESOGENIC FOOD

"One strange consequence of the prevailing loss of real quality in food is that a great many people, even relatively poor people, eat habitually far too much ... Malnutrition is rarely nowadays a quantitative phenomenon. The organism can never be satisfied with the fearsome, tainted, bleached, washed-out, and long-dead material with which it is supplied, and being unsatisfied calls out for more. In vain does man distend his stomach with an excess of such things - what he must have is not there" (p.71).

LOCALISM

"It is ludicrous to cart stuff about all over the world, so someone can make a 'profit' out of doing so, when that stuff could much better be produced where it is wanted" (p.104).

ECONOMIC RATIONALISM

"Cheap food has been the plausible excuse ... Cheap food, cheap everything. The lowering of financial cost is our ideal, because we have come to have no idea of profit other than financial profit" (p.66).

ENVIRONMENT

"Economics have been discussed ad nauseam. The biological state of the world has, in its broader aspects, received relatively little attention, though it conditions the economic state" (p.2).

STEWARDSHIP OF THE LAND

"Tests will be little needed if the economic situation is such that building up fertility pays not less well than using it up for immediate profit, so that the farmer's instinct can have fair play. Certainly in no department of life could policing be more justifiable, for there are few greater crimes against humanity than 'letting down the land.' Therefore a system of tenure must be devised which gives security both to the cultivator in his work, and to the community at large against speculation in and misuse of land" (pp.141-142).

ANIMAL WELFARE

"His life is interlocked with the lives of many other creatures, so if he cannot live well neither can those creatures which live in close relationship with him. If his nutrition is wrong, so will theirs be, and vice versa" (p.52). "The conception of a whole diet is a simple one; remembering that 'whole' means both healthy and complete. If we can see life as a whole, we must also be able to see that we cannot have a whole diet unless the creatures on which we depend have one" (p. 189).

HOLISM

"The interdependence of living creatures ... Though this be a truism, it must be stated in order to emphasise the uselessness of considering the situation of any man or association of men or geographical unit as if it were isolated from all others ... Besides being bound up with the lives of his fellow-men, every man's life is bound up with the lives of innumerable non-human creatures ... Thus there is a very real economic and biological linkage, comprehensive and of infinite complexity, between all living creatures in the world" (pp.1 & 2). "We still habitually look at life in bits and pieces; we analyse and specialize in all departments and are completely bewildered by the complexity of the results. We try to tackle each bit separately; our doing so invariably produces a complication somewhere else ... We can never correct even our diet bit by bit" (p.189).

ON FARM-GATE PRICES

"Urban concentration has made inevitable the power and predominance of the distributive trades, with its accompaniment of a very big difference between the price paid by the consumer and that received by the producer" (p.37).

BIODIVERSITY

"Large scale monoculture (the growing of one crop only) upsets the balance of factors in the soil in many ways. There is no give and take between crops. Disease spreads easily. Nature always provides a mixture

of plants, and of animals; only so can living matter be kept constantly in circulation without wastage" (p.21).

CHEMICAL REDUCTIONISM

"No chemist has ever analysed or described in chemical terms a living creature, however humble; and there is not the slightest chance that he ever will" (p.159- 160).

PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

"If we waited for scientific proof of every impression before deciding to take any consequential action we might avoid a few mistakes, but we should also hardly ever decide to act at all. In practice, decisions about most things that really matter have to be taken on impressions, or on intuition, otherwise they would be far too late ... We have to live our lives in practice, and can very rarely wait for scientific verification of our hypotheses. If we did we should all soon be dead, for complete scientific verification is hardly ever possible. It is a regrettable fact that a demand for scientific proof is a weapon often used to delay the development of an idea" (p.41).

ECONOMICS AND CHEMISTRY

"Farming cannot be treated as a mixture of chemistry and cost accountancy, nor can it be pulled into conformity with the exigencies of modern business, in which speed, cheapness, and standardizing count most. Nature will not be driven. If you try, she hits back slowly, but very hard" (pp.90 & 91).

CONQUEST OF NATURE

"The idea of conquering nature is as sensible as if a man should try to cut off his own head so as to isolate his superior faculties ... We have invented or imagined a fight between ourselves and nature; so, of course the whole of nature, which includes ourselves as well as the soil, suffers ... We have tried to conquer nature by force and by intellect. It now remains for us to try the way of love" (pp.191-192).

THE FUTURE

As Northbourne observed "We have plenty, actual and potential; but plenty of what? That is the real question" (p.73). The visions of Steiner (1924), Pfeiffer, and Northbourne were that biodynamics and organics are technologies and philosophies for world agriculture, and that we would thereby have plenty of biodynamic and organic food.

How and when might this utopia, of a world converted to biodynamic and organic agriculture, be achieved? (Paull, 2010). Of the task ahead, Northbourne declared: "It is a task for generations of concentrated effort, slow and laborious, needing all available skill and resources ... A combination of cooperation and individual effort ... And those engaged will be fighting a rearguard action for many decades, perhaps for centuries" (p.115).

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