

It's organic because Germany invaded Poland: How and why organic got its name and the Oxford connection

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Abstract

The term “organic farming” first appeared in Lord Northbourne’s manifesto of organic agriculture, *Look to the Land*, published in 1940.¹ This paper reveals how the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 was the compelling reason for the writing of the book, and how the University of Oxford played key roles at important times in Northbourne’s life in shaping and sustaining his thinking. He was both a graduate in agriculture as well as a lecturer in agriculture of the university. This paper examines how and why the term ‘organic’ came to be, the timing of the term and the timing of the book, and why WWII was a crucial element in shaping Northbourne’s framing of the food contest of modern times as a contest of ‘organic versus chemical farming’.² He foresaw this as a contest lasting decades, and ‘perhaps for centuries’.³ Northbourne’s book was prescient in flagging many pressing contemporary food issues including animal welfare, food localism, food sovereignty, food security, while at the same time criticising junk food, chemical reductionism, industrial farming, monoculture farming, and the view of food production as primarily an economics driven enterprise. Northbourne championed a holistic approach to problem solving rather than a reductionist approach, and this pervades his thinking. It led him to fraternise with the leading advocates of his time of alternative agricultures and it shaped his philosophy of agriculture. In the years since *Look to the Land* first appeared, a great deal has been written about the how-to of organic farming, yet Northbourne remains unsurpassed as the master of the why-to of organic farming.

Key Words: Organic agriculture, organic farming, organic food, Germany, Poland, Lord Northbourne, University of Oxford, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Rudolf Steiner.

1. Lord Northbourne’s dilemma

The year 1940 was not a propitious time in Britain to be relating the story of the nice German man you met who had shared some wonderful ideas. Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 plunging the world into the maelstrom of World War II for the next six years. This was no time to be championing Germanic ideas, and this posed a dilemma for Lord Northbourne.

He had read Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer’s 1938 book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening*. The book realised Rudolf Steiner’s injunction to bring the ‘hints’ of his 1924 Koberwitz Agriculture Course into ‘a form suitable for publication’. Northbourne most likely never met Steiner (who died in 1925) but he was impressed enough to visit Pfeiffer in Switzerland in January 1939 and successfully

urge him to run a biodynamics conference, the first in Britain, and with Northbourne as host and organiser, the *Betteshanger Summer School and Conference on Bio-Dynamic Farming* (1-9 July, 1939).

Of course, the ideas in *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* were Germanic only in the sense that Pfeiffer was German and the book was translated from his original text written in German, the ideas themselves were always proposed as universal - and there were attendees from six countries at Steiner's original course. But such subtleties were unlikely to play well in a Britain once more at war with its militant neighbour.

With the invasion of Poland shattering the delicate peace of Europe (and the world) the marketability of Germanic ideas had suddenly plummeted. Pfeiffer was the leading exponent of biodynamic agriculture at the time, and he was coordinating the activities of the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners (ECAFG) out of Anthroposophy headquarters, the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. The Experimental Circle was set up by Rudolf Steiner at his Agriculture Course presented in the summer of 1924 in Koberwitz (it was then a German town, but after WWII the region was ceded to Poland and it is now on the map as 'Kobierzyce'). Steiner's instructions at Koberwitz were to develop an alternative to the chemical agriculture then in the ascendance with its increasing reliance on synthetic chemical inputs. The task of Experimental Circle was to put Steiner's ideas expounded at Koberwitz to the test, and at the point where an effective alternative farming methodology was proven then to share it with the world.

Anti-German sentiment was understandably strong in wartime Britain and elsewhere in the Anglosphere. When Pfeiffer's book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* appeared in 1938 the title-page informed readers correctly that the text was 'Translated from the German by Fred Heckel'. In the second edition which appeared in 1940 that inscription had been deleted. Such de-Germanification was a sign of the times. Steiner's 1924 Agriculture Course first appeared in English in 1928 translated by George Kaufmann. However from early in WWII, George Kaufmann went by the name George Adams (adopting his mother's maiden name) and he never reverted to his birth name. The phenomenon was not new. In WWI as far away as Australia, Germanic sounding place names were replaced (albeit temporarily) with more Anglo-sounding names or Aboriginal names as, for example, Hahndorf became Ambleside, and German Creek became Benara Creek.⁴

Steiner's foundational idea of his alternative agriculture was that the farm is an organism - and not a factory or some other construct of instrumentalist thinking. Pfeiffer carried this forward with his lectures at Betteshanger of 'The Soil as a Living Organism' and 'The Farm as a Biological Organism'.

Northbourne had been impressed from the start with biodynamics, writing: 'this is the most attractive idea I have come across for some time, & I will do all in my power to promote it'.⁵ His *Betteshanger Summer School and Conference on Bio-Dynamic Farming* was one practical way to implement that desire. There were

about 40 attendees at the conference. A participant described the experience of the Betteshanger Summer School:

It was one of the most exciting weeks I ever spent. We would work part of the day on his bio- dynamic methods, and then both for recreation and refreshment Pfeiffer would lecture to us in the evenings.⁶

Northbourne reported on the success of the Betteshanger Biodynamics Conference:

... the spirit of friendliness, happiness and unity which prevailed. That was a striking and perhaps not the least important feature of the school. It is true to say that for nine days the possibility of war was scarcely alluded to; things more real and more constructive absorbed attention.⁷

How to advance the project under the prevailing conditions (of WWII)? A book could extend the reach dramatically. There was Pfeiffer's 1938 book with its Germanic, Steiner, and Anthroposophy associations, added to which it was not a particularly engaging read. Pfeiffer was by all accounts most remarkable and talented, and Viscount Lymington described him as 'a very wise and practiced farmer, and an acute observer of nature'⁸ but his forte was never writing. A later work of his published in the USA warning of the dangers of DDT and well documented with over 1000 references⁹ caused barely a ripple (which probably overstates it) until the text and references were in the hands of a masterful wordsmith, Rachel Carson, who reframed the warning and repurposed Pfeiffer's references as *Silent Spring*, and changed the world.¹⁰

Northbourne's *Look to the Land* was published in May 1940, it took the idea of the farm as an organism and from it generated the new term 'organic' farming, and it effectively secularised biodynamics. *Look to the Land* excised any obvious Germanic, esoteric, mystical or Anthroposophic provenance, while still crediting biodynamics as a proven method of practicing organic farming:

... the 'bio-dynamic 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.¹¹

Look to the Land set up a contest of 'organic versus chemical farming'. Northbourne saw these two agricultures as opposed in practice and philosophy, he did not entertain the idea of some happy coexistence, and he foresaw the contest of these opposing philosophies playing out perhaps over generations.

Northbourne's 'organic farming' was derived from Steiner's (and Pfeiffer's) characterisation of the farm as an organism. It was not derived from the chemistry usage of 'organic' meaning containing carbon. The opposite of organic chemistry is inorganic chemistry, while the opposite of organic farming is chemical farming (and not inorganic farming which is an ill-conceived back-construction based on a misunderstanding of the derivation of 'organic farming').

Northbourne's ideas and terminology were promptly taken up around the world. Jerome Rodale in USA published the world's first 'organic' periodical, *Organic Farming and Gardening*, in 1942,¹² and the first 'organic' association was founded in New South Wales as the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* (AOFGS) in 1944.¹³

2. Lord Northbourne's Oxford

Oxford played an important role in Northbourne's life. Northbourne studied agriculture at Oxford University, he taught agriculture here, and he farmed 1000 acres nearby until he took over the family estate in Kent in 1932. As a student at Magdalen College (founded 1458; and pronounced locally as 'maudlin') he competed in the 1920 Olympics and returned with a silver medal.

Northbourne matriculated at Oxford University, on 1 May 1919, listing, on his candidature form Magdalen College as his Oxford University college. He was a student at the School of Agriculture and Forestry of Oxford University and a resident at Magdalen College (1919-1921). He achieved a distinction in Agriculture in Trinity Term 1920 and he received his degree of BA Agriculture (Distinction) on 20 January 1921.¹⁴ Magdalen is situated on the River Cherwell (a tributary of the Isis, the local name for the River Thames) and is opposite the University of Oxford Botanic Garden.

The Oxford University student magazine, *The Isis*, profiled James as an 'ISIS Idol' stating that: 'he graduated with such success in the School of Agriculture that for these last two Terms he has been initiating awe-struck pupils into the mysteries of patent manures. He is, then, an accomplished agriculturalist'.¹⁵

The annotation on the reverse of Northbourne's Oxford student record card reads: 'Farming about 1000 acres' (he was 'Walter James' before succeeding to the title). In the *Magdalen College Register* of 1922 his occupation is listed as 'Lecturer, School of Rural Economy' and 'farming', with his address as 'Nettlebed, Oxfordshire'. He was a lecturer in the School of Rural Economy, University of Oxford, from 1921 to 1923.¹⁶

At Oxford, Northbourne was a champion rower. He was a member of the Oxford University Boat Club (OUBC) VIII, (1920-1921), and he was elected President of the OUBC in 1920. The Oxford student magazine *The Isis* stated that: 'he is the backbone of the Varsity Eight, and would be of any Eight'.¹⁷ His period of participation was described as 'the Second Golden Era' for rowing at Magdalen.¹⁸

Five members from Magdalen, including Northbourne, along with three

rowers from Cambridge, competed in the 'Rowing Eights' event in the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium. 'They even had to carry their boat two miles from Brussels station to the course a few days before the race'¹⁹. The British Rowing Eight team returned with Olympic silver medals.

On the death of his father on 24 December 1932, Walter James succeeded to the title as 4th Baron Northbourne. His books and articles are henceforth authored as 'Lord Northbourne', and his letters are generally signed simply as 'Northbourne'. He was now entitled to a seat in the House of Lords which he took up in the years 1934 to 1937.²⁰

At Merton College (founded 1264), Oxford University, in 1942 Northbourne told a Kinship in Husbandry meeting that: 'You will see that I am prejudiced in favour of the B-D [Bio-Dynamic] method, and if asked "how best can our ideas be expressed in terms of farm management ideas" could only answer accordingly; though I don't pretend to understand it fully'.²¹

The Kinship in Husbandry was an informal group of contrarian agrarian writers which met variously at Oxford and London during WWII. Northbourne wrote of the important role that this fellowship played for him:

I am rather on the 'quietest' side ... I value very highly the effect on individual members of the fact of association in the kinship; no doubt because it has saved me from so much feeling of loneliness. If it has done as much for others, the repercussions of its mere existence must be appreciable and may be great.²²

3 Conclusion

In the course of a few years, 1938 - 1940, Northbourne went from his initial enthusiasm for biodynamics, to his declaration that 'I will do all in my power to promote it', to visiting Ehrenfried Pfeiffer in Switzerland, to organising and hosting the first biodynamics conference in Britain, to publishing his own book, *Look to the Land*, which introduced the term 'organic farming', which set up the world view of a contest of 'organic versus chemical agriculture', and which, by secularising the biodynamics message, opened up alternative agriculture to a broad international audience.

When Pfeiffer and the other members of Steiner's Experimental Circle developed the term 'biodynamic' farming they might more simply have hit upon the term 'organic' than the more cumbersome 'biodynamic'. Steiner had given them the lead of 'the farm is an organism'; it was a lead that Northbourne took up. Steiner himself was taken ill within a few months of the Agriculture Course and retreated entirely from public life for the remaining few months of his life, he had no opportunity to repeat the Agriculture Course, and he lived to witness neither term. In any event, it was Steiner's style to launch ideas with some rudimentary start-up infrastructure in place to carry the ideas forward, and to let that process play out with a great deal of latitude.

When Northbourne came to develop his own treatise on alternative agriculture he settled on 'organic' farming and restated Steiner's formulation of the farm as an

organism. It was a logical derivation which managed to simultaneously pay homage to Steiner's initiative while at the same time successfully decoupling itself from its mystical, Germanic and Anthroposophic provenance.

Thirty years after *Look to the Land*, Northbourne observed that the organic movement of the day was battling on:

A few people have tried and are still trying to produce food without the help of chemical fertilizers and sprays, and a few people - perhaps a growing number - prefer to buy food thus produced, and who dares to say that they are wrong? These counter-movements carry very little weight at present; a large majority of people are not interested and much prefer to swim with the stream, while dismissing the objectors to food grown by modern methods as being mere faddists.²³

It was a Parisian, Roland Cheviot, the President of the French group Nature et Progrès, who cemented the future for 'organic' as the consensual umbrella term of alternative agricultures. Cheviot wrote to like-minded organisations in 1972 that: 'I think that the creation of an international federation of organic agriculture movements would be of much interest to all of us and for humanity; this federation respecting all particularities and individualities'.²⁴ The outcome was the formation of the *International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements* (IFOAM) now headquartered in Bonn.²⁵ Statistics are published annually as *The World of Organic Agriculture*, and are reported from 162 countries with the organics sector now valued at over US\$60 billion and accounting for 37.2 million hectares of agricultural land certified as organic.²⁶

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Notes

¹ Northbourne, Lord. *Look to the Land*. London: Dent, 1940.

² Ibid. p.119.

³ Ibid. p.115.

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²³ p.80 in Northbourne, Lord. *Looking Back on Progress*. London: Perennial Books, 1970.

²⁴ Chevriot, Roland. *Subject: Creation of an International Federation*. Typescript letter, 1 page, undated. Paris: Nature et Progrès, 1972.

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