

Book Review

By John Paull

Fenner School of Environment & Society, Australian National University, Canberra

Rudolf Steiner: An Introduction to His Life and Work *by Gary Lachman, 2007*

Organic agriculture has been described as “muck and mystery” and it is Rudolf Steiner who was the master of the “mystery”. Steiner was a prolific writer and lecturer who has left a lasting legacy - most notably Biodynamic agriculture and Waldorf schools. And yet, Steiner is not an easy read, and one often looks in vain for the quotable quote that sums up his thought on a subject.

The mystery of the success, influence and longevity of Steiner’s thoughts warrant illumination. Steiner’s thoughts and writings are often more obscure than lucid, and yet eight decades after his passing, there are a reported 870 Steiner Waldorf schools and 1600 Waldorf kindergartens in 60 countries (ECSWE, 2003), and Biodynamic agriculture is now practiced in 38 countries (Demeter, 2007).

So, a new Steiner biography to unravel some of the mystery that is Rudolf Steiner would be welcome. It is a wonderful treat to read a great biography - unfortunately no such treat awaits the reader of this latest flawed offering. It is a book that suffers from poor writing, poor editing and poor researching; and the few insights it tenders the reader, probably reveal more about Lachman the biographer than Steiner the subject.

Lachman writes that the autobiography is “the most readable of Steiner’s writings” (p. 259), and that there exists “a daunting number of Steiner's lectures ... covering a sometimes bewildering range of topics” (p. 262). Lachman admits: “To put it bluntly, I found Steiner tough going ... there was just something dull about Steiner” (p. xvii). Steiner’s unfinished autobiography covers the period from his birth in 1861, in what was then Hungary and is now Croatia, to Austrian parents, through to a premature ending in 1907 due to the author’s death at Dornach, Switzerland in 1925 at the age of 64.

Lachman draws heavily on Steiner’s autobiography. Part of the consequence of this, is that Biodynamic farming, dating from 1924, and one of Steiner’s most enduring legacies, gets barely a mention - and that in the final chapter, “Last Days and Legacy”. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer gets a single and uninformative mention, giving the reader no inkling of the role he would subsequently play in the uptake of Biodynamics, firstly in Europe and then worldwide. How did it come to pass that a series of eight lectures, delivered in the summer of 1924 to an audience of sixty, in Koberwitz, has had such a lasting impact?

Page 53

The obscure village of Koberwitz, with a population of less than 15,000, is now Koberzyce, Poland, and has also been known as Rosslingen (Falling Rain Genomics, 2004). Steiner delivered his *Agriculture Course* there from June 7 to June 16, 1924 less than a year before his death. Those lectures were first published in English more than thirty years later (Steiner, 1958), although Pfeiffer published an account, *The Biological-Dynamic Method of Rudolf Steiner*, in English in 1934 (Pfeiffer, 1947).

The Lachman book suffers from poor and loose writing. Lachman writes that he was “bitten” when he surely means “smitten” (p. xvii), Goethe “more or less started the Romantic movement” (p. 41), Steiner is “an embarrassingly creative individual” (p. 42), in Europe pessimism “has remained more or less dominant ever since” (p. 52), and he “wonders how Steiner’s talk went over” (p. 110). We read of the qualified claim that “what remains perhaps his most important book, *The Philosophy of Freedom*” (p. 70); then shortly after the same claim reappears without qualification as “what remains his most important book, *The Philosophy of Freedom*” (p. 90). From there the intrepid biographer ventures his unsubstantiated thought that “professors and philosophers couldn’t make head or [sic] tail of *The Philosophy of Freedom*” (p. 114).

Lachman appears lost in la-la land when he ventures his opinions on women: “As Pauline Specht would have been in her late thirties when Steiner met her, it’s a reasonable assumption that she would still have been attractive ... this formidable older woman no doubt became a kind of mother figure for him” (p. 58). Then of Steiner’s first wife Lachman declares that “Yet we can assume that his relationship with Anna Eunicke must have been of equal, if different, importance [to his second wife] ... We can assume that Steiner’s relationship with Anna wasn’t romantic ... it’s safe to assume that Steiner may have felt some misgivings about his relationship with Anna Eunicke and her family, and so played this down when telling his life story” (p. 88, 89). The wannabe-psychologist biographer then wades in: “When he met Anna ... she was also in her early forties and may no longer have felt any romantic inclinations” (p. 90). Lachman offers not a shred of evidence for these assumptions, and nor for his claim that Steiner was a virginal celibate all his life. Of Anna, Steiner wrote in his autobiography “I was soon on terms of intimate friendship, [she] watched over all my needs in the most devoted fashion” (Steiner, 1928, p. 211). He wrote “Of my private life, I do not wish to introduce anything into this biography except what concerns my process of development ... private relationships do not belong to the public ... my spiritual development is, in reality, utterly independent of all private relationships” (Steiner, 1928, p. 270). At the outset of his autobiography Steiner indicated that this was a work about his “spiritual evolution”, and of the congruence between his life and his teachings - that his own inclinations did not lead the task of exposition, but rather that the task was urged upon him by fellow anthroposophists.

We learn from Lachman that Steiner frequented the Megalomania Cafe in Vienna where he reports the clientele included “a retinue of vegetarians, Wagnerians, occultists, and other eccentrics” (p. 68); that when Steiner applied for the job of editing Goethe’s scientific papers he “had little difficulty in presenting himself as the man for the job” (p. 72); that “Although established, Steiner was still unknown” (p. 81); and

of the biologist/philosopher Haeckel, Lachman writes “his name became something like a household word” (p. 80) - cringeworthy drivel.

The biography would have been relieved by some photographs, obvious candidates include: Steiner’s first wife Anna Eunicke (she died in 1911); his second wife Marie von Sievers (they married in 1913, Lachman uses the alternative spelling von Sivers); Annie Besant (president of the Theosophical Society, Steiner became the foundation General Secretary of the German section in 1902); the Goetheanum I (the timber-construction Anthroposophical headquarters built in Dornach, Switzerland, opened in 1920, burnt to the ground in 1922); and the replacement Goetheanum II (built of reinforced-concrete). The index in Lachman mistakenly reads “Dornach (Germany)” - the Dornach of Steinerian interest was, and remains, in Switzerland south of Basel .

Lachman fails to refer to letters, diaries, manuscripts and the multitude of primary sources that one would reasonably expect to inform a new biography. He quotes earlier biographers including Johannes Hemleben (1975) and Colin Wilson (1985). The Endnotes include a Wikipedia URL, a practice unacceptable even in a high school essay.

Who was Steiner the man and what was the secret of his charisma? Lachman cites Russian novelist Andrei Belyi’s report of Steiner that he had “a therapeutic smile ... the faculty of direct expression from the heart “ and that he was “after all, Rudolf Steiner, and he had the capacity to transform every situation into an unforgettable moment” (p. 168, 169).

One of the rare treasures in the Lachman biography is a lengthy quote, tucked away in the Endnotes (p. 251), and by the Russian philosopher Nicolai Berdyaev who reported, in his own autobiography, a revealing account of his attendance at a Steiner lecture series in Helsinki:

He was a man who convinced and hypnotized not only others but himself. He seemed to possess a number of characters which he changed like masks as the need arose, now he was a benevolent pastor ... now a magician holding sway over human souls ... His sole purpose and aspiration was to obtain possession of all things from below, by his own titanic devices, and to break through by a passionate effort to the realm of the spirit... He may have possessed oratorical gifts, but he lacked the true gift and feeling for words. His speech was a kind of magical act, aimed at obtaining control over his hearers by means of gestures, by raising and lowering his voice, and by changes in the expression of his face. He hypnotized his disciples, some of whom even fell asleep.

Lachman identifies that “Steiner rose to prominence as the most important esoteric teacher of his time” (p.151). The text of many of the lectures by Steiner - including some of the eight lectures and discussions that comprise Steiner’s 1924 Agriculture Course that set in train the Biodynamic agriculture movement - are available free at the Rudolf Steiner web archive <www.rsarchive.org>.

Steiner's autobiography "The Story of My Life" - this authorized translation of 342 pages edited by H. Collison, including four photographs, and an after-word by his second wife Marie Steiner, was published in 1928 by Anthroposophical Publishing, London - is available free, and complete, on the web at <www.rsarchive.org/bBooks>. Those with a taste for reading a Steiner biography would be well served starting their journey with this eText, rather than accept the lacklustre biography: "Rudolf Steiner, An Introduction to His Life and Work", Gary Lachman, Penguin Group (USA), New York, 2007.

References:

Demeter, 1998-2007, *This is Demeter*, Demeter-International, Brussels, available at: <www.demeter.net>.

ECSWE, 2003, *Steiner Newssheet*, 09-03, European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, Sussex, UK, Nov 20.

Falling Rain Genomics, 1996-2004, *Kobierzyce, Poland Page*, available at: <www.fallingrain.com>

Hemleben, J., 1975, *Rudolf Steiner: A Documentary Biography*, Henry Gouliden Ltd., East Grinstead, UK.

Pfeiffer, E., 1947, repr. 1983, *Soil Fertility, Renewal & Preservation, Bio-dynamic Farming and Gardening*, Lanthorn Press, East Grinstead, UK.

Steiner, R., 1928, *The Story of My Life*, Anthroposophical Publishing Co., London, available at: <www.rsarchive.org/Books>.

Steiner, R., 1958, repr. 2004, *Agriculture Course, The Birth of the Biodynamic Method, Eight Lectures given in Koberwitz, Silesia between 7 and 16 June 1924*, translated by George Adams, Rudolf Steiner Press, Forest Row, UK, available incomplete at: <www.rsarchive.org>.

Colin Wilson, C., 1985, *Rudolf Steiner: The Man and His Vision*, Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, UK.