

Bob Crowder: A New Zealand Organics Pioneer. By Matt Morris. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2024. 244pp. NZ Price: \$45. ISBN: 9781990048746. Reviews (Books).

John Paull

The organics movement is the quest for pure food. The genre of books on pioneers of organics is slender, and a new contribution from New Zealand (NZ) is welcome. This book about Bob Crowder (b.1939) comes in the wake of earlier biographies about organics pioneers, including of New Zealander C. Alma Baker (1857-1941), Eve Balfour (1898-1990) of the UK, Jerome Rodale (1898-1971) of the USA, and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961) of Switzerland.

New Zealand (NZ) seems a 'natural' for the adoption of organic agriculture. NZ markets itself as 'clean and green'. NZ has generally avoided the legacy-pollution of heavy industries. NZ is out of the slip stream of pollution swirling around the Northern hemisphere. Organic produce is a premium product and it attracts a premium price reflecting its eco-credentials.

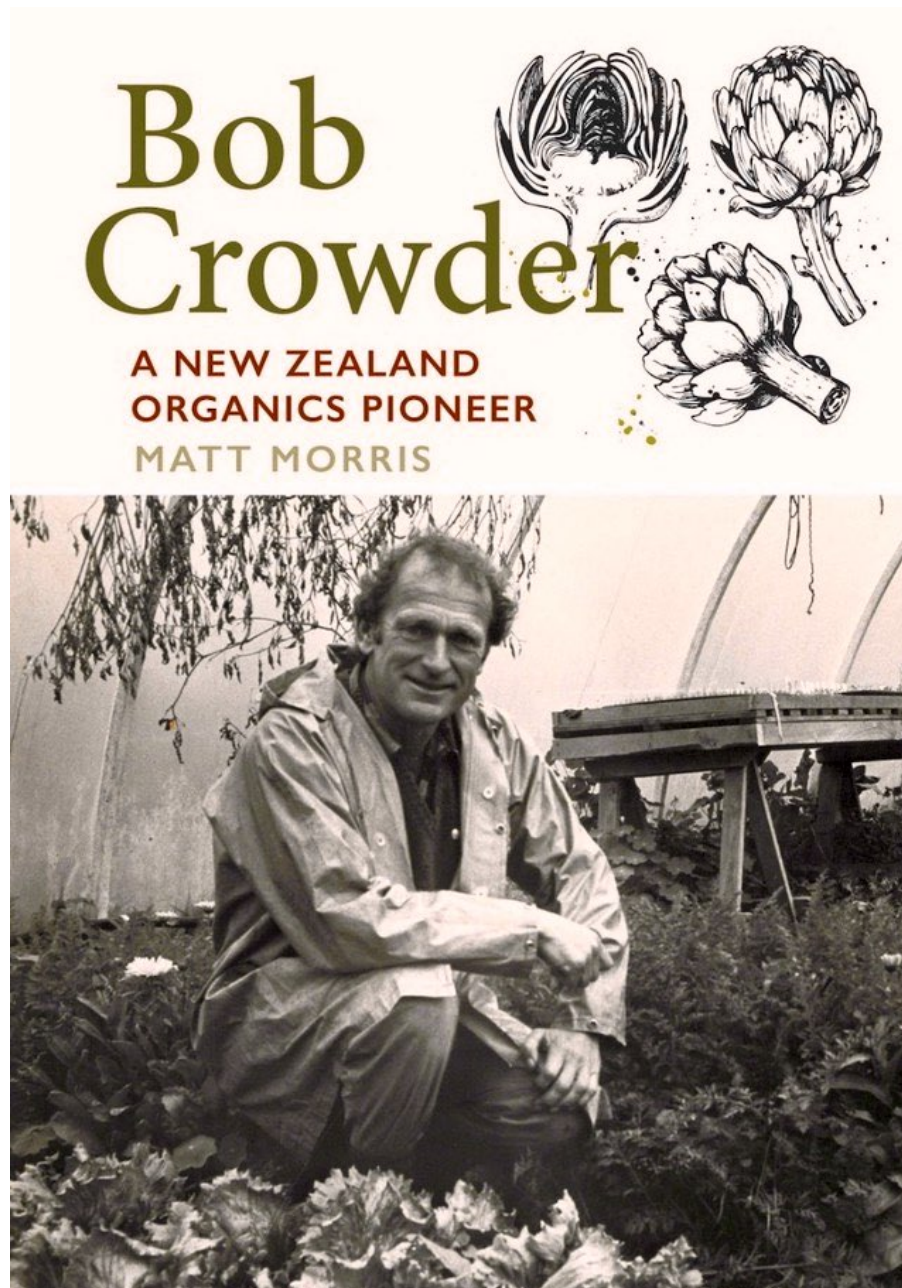
Bob Crowder studied horticulture at Nottingham University, UK. He departed for NZ, in 1962, where he took up an appointment as a horticultural adviser with the NZ Department of Agriculture. His next job, in 1966, was as a lecturer in horticulture at Lincoln College, near Christchurch. Bob made this Lincoln appointment a whole-of-life appointment. He began a PhD, but never completed it. By the time he retired in 1999, Lincoln College was Lincoln University (from 1990).

During his tenure at Lincoln, Bob was challenged, in 1977, by students seeking an eco/green tinge to their horticulture studies. Bob obliged, and this ushered in an organics epiphany and launched him on his journey as an organics advocate. That year, Bob joined NZ's Soil & Health Association (established 1941) (p.76).

Eschewing the received organics nomenclature, Bob set up the awkwardly named 'Biological Husbandry Unit' (BHU) on several hectares of Lincoln College land (variously 3 hectares, 6 ha, and 10 ha). Bob admitted that: 'understanding of the meaning of Biological Husbandry still appears confused' (p.96). The BHU served as a testbed and showcase for organic production.

Bob had an uneasy relationship with Lincoln. He claimed that 'I have been marginalised by Lincoln' (p.173), that he was subject to 'ridicule and animosity' (p.128), and declared that he was 'bitter about the whole way things were going' (p.149). Morris states that 'his relationships with ... academic staff continued to deteriorate' (p.136). One account relates that: 'his often abrasive and dogmatic attitude towards anyone who does not agree with him has not encouraged much sympathetic support in the industry' (p.151).

Bob was elected in absentia (p.217) in 1989 to the World Board of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) based in Bonn, Germany. He served on the Board for a decade (until 1998) although it seems he missed most of the meetings. The 'pinnacle' (p.145) of his organics career was to bring the biennial (now triennial) 'IFOAM Conference' (Organic World Congress) to Christchurch in 1994. It must have been expected that hosting this international event would give a fillip to the NZ organics sector.



This book reveals some detail about Bob's sexuality and various partners. He was gay at a time when homosexuality was illegal in NZ (until 1986), and he was somewhat reticent. Another facet of Bob's life is Morris dancing, a style of English folk dancing featuring dressing up in breeches, sashes, and bells, along with accoutrements of rhythm sticks and handkerchiefs. It is described as a male pursuit but a lack of devotees in Canterbury apparently led to women Morris dancers.

The title of the Bob Crowder book describes him as an ‘organics pioneer’. Morris uncritically quotes: ‘Mr Crowder was publicly identified and recognised as the founder of organic farming in New Zealand’ (p.154). This is pure puffery, a case of historical amnesia. By the time that Bob developed his interest in organics there had already been 50 years of organics advocacy in New Zealand, there were decades-old NZ associations dedicated to organics practice and advocacy, there were decades of past NZ organics journals, as well as generations of experienced practitioners and advocates. It was into a well established organics milieu that Bob entered as a newbie in 1977.

The book claims that the organic statistics for NZ are ‘impressive’ (p.196). Other than in an Orwellian New Speak universe, the organics figures for NZ are the antithesis of ‘impressive’. NZ reports a total of 79,347 certified organic hectares accounting for 0.8% of NZ agricultural land. Globally, 2% of agricultural land is certified organic, so NZ is an organics laggard. Near neighbour Australia has 53,016,058 certified organic hectares accounting for 15% of Australia’s agricultural land. Most countries out perform NZ in the uptake of organics. Switzerland is 18% organic. Europe plans to be 25% organic by 2030.

‘Bob Crowder: A New Zealand Organics Pioneer’ is a timely book with its publication coinciding with the centenary of the call at Koberwitz by Rudolf Steiner for the development of a differentiated agriculture, and thereby with the centenary of organics. The biography throws some light on Bob’s contribution to organics in NZ, it notes ‘the negativity from other Lincoln academics’ (p.197), it is blended with contemporary organics events in NZ, Bob’s homosexuality, and his Morris dancing. Morris admits that ‘Bob’s legacy is not often found in the published records of formal institutions ... he had an aversion to academia’ (p.197). The international depository of organics research (orgprints.org) contains no contributions of Bob Crowder and just a single contribution associated with Lincoln University.

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