



The Biodynamic Movement in Britain, A History of the First 100 Years, Bernard Jarman, Floris Books, 2024 (Book Review)

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Abstract

The book 'The Biodynamic Movement in Britain, A History of the First 100 Years' is timely but disappointing. Timely, because Dr Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) presented his Agriculture Course at Koberwitz a century ago, and thereby laid foundations for the development of the Biodynamics (BD) and organic agriculture movements. Disappointing, because it is riddled with errors, hearsay, and gratuitous fabrication. The book is not founded on rigorous scholarship but rather presents a mishmash of truths, half-truths, and fabrications as historical fact. In Britain, the Biodynamics movement dates back to an Anthroposophy Conference at the Quaker Centre in London in 1928, where Dr Carl Mirbt (aka Mier) (1902-1975), as an emissary of Count Carl Keyserlingk (1869-1928), presented a lecture on Steiner's agricultural ideas. The newly widowed Marna Pease (1866-1947) promptly took up the challenge of advancing the cause and recruited Mirbt to promote BD in Britain. Under Marna Pease's stewardship the BD movement took root in Britain and the Anglo-sphere more broadly. The book's account of her is muddled. On a positive note, this book lists all the office bearers of the three British BD associations from 1928 through 2023. The book creates and propagates false narratives and is not recommended for reading or acquisition. The book is recommended for retraction and subsequent revision; or alternatively, reassignment as 'historical fiction'.

Keywords: *Rudolf Steiner; Koberwitz; Carl Keyserlingk; Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation (AAF); Marna Pease; Carl Mirbt; Carl Mier*

The Book Under Review

The Biodynamic Movement in Britain, A History of the First 100 Years, Bernard Jarman, Floris Books, 2024, 178 pp., £16.99, ISBN 978-178250-869-4.

Introduction

The Austrian New Age philosopher Dr Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) delivered a course of eight lectures on agriculture in the summer of 1924 at the otherwise unremarkable village of Koberwitz (at the time in eastern Germany; now Kobierzyce in western Poland). In the wake of World War I, the chemical agriculture of the day was gaining momentum [1, 2]. Steiner called for a differentiated agriculture based on biology rather than chemistry [3].

The Agriculture Course was delivered by Steiner in German to 111 Anthroposophist attendees [4]. There was no Anglo presence. This course laid the foundations for the development of Biodynamic agriculture and organic agriculture [5].

It is timely for an account of Biodynamics in Britain to appear because a century has elapsed since Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course at Koberwitz.

Review

This is a seriously flawed book which is a great shame because the topic is both important and timely. On the first page of text, Jarman claims Count Carl Keyserlingk (1869-1928) was "the owner" of the Koberwitz estate [6, p.7]; not so, Keyserlingk was a manager, never the owner.

On the next page we read that: "The agricultural lectures were given primarily to those who were involved practically with agriculture" [6, p.8]; not so, only 38% of Koberwitzers described their profession as agricultural [4]. This book continues in this unscholarly vein and is littered throughout with falsehoods and made-up tosh, and that all reflects poorly on the publisher for not doing their due diligence.

This book was sent to the reviewer by the publisher as a PDF so I cannot speak to the production values or the haptic qualities of the printed book. The PDF sent was print-disabled and annotation-disabled. Such a version is not recommended for those who want to mark-up their copy. It appears from the publisher website that hardcopy books are print-on-demand.



Figure 1. Venue for Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course in June 1924 at Koberwitz, (Kobierzyce) (photographed in June 2024; image: J Paull).

The book includes 19 pages comprising three Appendices which list the names of office bearers of three associations: the Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation (AAF) (1928-1950); the Biodynamic Association (BDA) (1938-1950); and the Biodynamic Agricultural Association (BDAA) (1951-2023) [6, pp.146-164]. These Appendices provide useful lists for those researching the history of Biodynamics in Britain. Unfortunately the names are presented only as a surname and one initial, rather than a fuller version of the names which would have facilitated researching the individuals. Most of the individuals listed in the Appendices make no appearance otherwise in the book.

The author of the book is a Biodynamics (BD) 'insider'. The rear cover states that: "Bernard Jarman worked as an apprentice on a biodynamic farm in Germany before running a hill farm in Botton Camphill Village, North Yorkshire. He was Executive Director of the Biodynamic Agricultural Association in the UK for fifteen years and continues to teach courses in biodynamic agriculture all around the world. He lives in Stroud, England".

From this bio-blurb, a reader is entitled to expect a well researched history, an interesting and celebratory account of the century of BD in Britain, and finally some insights into the BD century as success, failure, lost opportunity, or whatever. This book falls short of any such expectations. That is a shame since the history of BD in Britain is populated with 'colourful characters'. They included interesting and talented devotees of Rudolf Steiner, idealistic Anthroposophists, refugees from Nazi Germany, an Oxford agriculturist, and a Cambridge linguist. To the extent that they appear in 'The Biodynamic Movement in Britain' they have been bleached to beige.

‘The Biodynamic Movement’ is not a riveting book. It may be that neither the author nor the copyeditor have taken the effort to actually read this book. Otherwise, how to explain the curiosity that page 148 is an exact duplicate of page 147?

When Jarman introduces the ‘Experimental Circle’ he neglects to mention that this is a contraction of the ‘Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners’ [7]. The Experimental Circle (in Britain) persists to the present day. The *raison d’être* of an Experimental Circle is to experiment, but where are the experiments? And (if any) what were the outcomes? Jarman is silent on a century of experiments. This leaves the reader to wonder if the Circle has devolved into a social club?

Peer review is not always welcome but it is a tried and tested practice, and it can protect an author from silly blunders. Jarman claims that Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961) was a conscientious objector in WW1 [6, p.82], perhaps confusing Pfeiffer’s life with that of George Kaufmann (who spent time in Wandsworth Prison as a draft resister, and later translated the Agriculture Course into English) or Ernesto Genoni (who spent time in an Italian military prison as a draft resister, and later pioneered BD in Australia) [8]. Contrary to Jarman’s fiction, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer’s biographers report that Pfeiffer served in the German Army in WWI [e.g. 9].

Jarman has George Kaufmann’s father as German [6, p.48], when in reality he was an Australian mining engineer and he travelled on a British passport [10] (as was the case prior to, and for some time after, Australian federation).

The first rule of writing history is: ‘don’t make it up’. Errors of omission are more readily forgiven than errors of commission. Jarman has Dr Eugen Kolisko (1893-1939) travelling from Germany to Britain and dying in transit in London [6, p.65] on 29 November 1939. Jarman’s fabricated scenario is silly on multiple levels. The two countries were at war from 1 September 1939. At the time, Kolisko had no passport (from any country) nor a travel permit. He was living at Bray-on-Thames, he was an ‘enemy alien’ with an expiring permission to remain in Britain, he travelled to London from Bray to extend his permit, and died in London while on that quest.

Marna Pease is the ‘hero’ of BD in Britain but Jarman has Marna Pease’s story mangled. The Old Mill House at Bray-on-Thames was a joint project with her sister, Eleanor Merry. Eleanor Merry is not “her half sister” as Jarman has it [6, p.42]. Their parents were Herbert Snow (Kynaston) and Charlotte Cordeaux [11]. Jarman has it that Marna “took on the secretaryship [of the AAF] in 1934 ... a year or two later, however her husband died” [6, p.42] which is nonsense. Marna was the inaugural secretary of the AAF from 1928 and retained this role until 1946 (not “until the end of the Second World War” [6, p.44]. Marna’s husband, Howard Pease, died on 25 January 1928, six months before the ‘World Conference on Spiritual Science and its Practical Applications’ held in London (20 July - 1 August, 1928). Howard’s death released Marna from her domestic duties and this enabled her to take up the role of secretary of the Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation (AAF) (in 1928) [11]. Marna Pease had the time, the financial resources, the Anthropop passion, the familiarity with Steiner, and a mastery of German to fulfil her new *raison d’être* with distinction [11].

Carl Mirbt (later Mier) (1902-1975) came to London as a delegate of Count Keyserlingk to deliver the first BD lecture in UK in 1928. Marna Pease promptly recruited him as a BD advocate for the AAF. Jarman has Mier “receiving his diploma in 1926” [6, p.37]. That is a curious understatement given that Carl Mirbt was, far and away, the most qualified of all of a century of British Biodynamics advocates. Mirbt earned a doctorate from the Agricultural University in Berlin with a 1927 dissertation [12]. Jarman claims Mirbt changed his surname to ‘Mier’ “to make it easier to pronounce in English” [6, p.37]. But even the family point out that ‘myer’ and ‘mere’ are both common pronunciations in English of this new name.

Jarman has a teenager, Olive Whicher (1910-2006), as a co-translator (with George Kaufmann) of the Agriculture Course [6, p.50]; it wasn't so. Not for almost another decade did Olive Whicher meet George Kaufmann and Anthroposophy.

The image captioned "Attendees of the Agriculture Course" [6, p.23] is no such thing. The photo includes Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, and Pfeiffer certainly did not attend the Koberwitz Course [4, 13].

The book would benefit from losing fatuous aggrandising claims such as: "From the simple indications given by Rudolf Steiner, a well researched science of life has gradually evolved" [6, p.8]; and "Lili's work stood in complete contrast with that of nuclear scientists" [6, p.62] referring to the work of Lilly Kolisko. Extraordinary claims call for extraordinary evidence.

The Bibliography [6, p.170] is surprising for omissions. Glaring omissions include the BD milestone works of Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer [e.g. 14], of Lord Northbourne [e.g. 15], and of any Experimental Circle of Anthroposophical Farmers and Gardeners publications [e.g. 16]. Pfeiffer published 'Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening' in 1938 [14]. This was the public 'outing' of BD. Until this point BD had operated, at Steiner's behest, as a secret society. Experimental Circle members signed a non disclosure agreement (NDA) [17]. An Oxford agriculturist Lord Northbourne sponsored Pfeiffer to present a BD summer school at Northbourne's farm in Kent [18]. Northbourne is the biodynamic farmer who has arguably made a greater impact than the collective century of BD association office bearers populating the 19 pages of Appendices. Northbourne coined the term 'organic farming' and published his manifesto of organics 'Look to the Land' in 1940 [15].

In the photo credits [6, p.171] Jarman claims credit for himself for images appearing in his book of Marna Pease [6, p.43] and Lord Northbourne (at the time Walter James) [6, p.69]. These images appear to be 'lifted' from published research of the present reviewer. The Marna image was first published in Paull [19]. The image of Northbourne was photographed by the reviewer in the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, and appeared in Paull [5]. Republishing the images is not an issue, but not crediting sources is.

Verdict

The contrarians who have pursued Biodynamics for the past century deserve a better book than the one under review. This book is riddled with errors and cannot be relied upon nor recommended. Passing off misinformed and muddled hearsay as fact is unacceptable in a history book. Omissions are necessary, errors of omission are generally forgivable, but errors of commission can be fatal (as in the present case).

This book bleaches to beige the colourful devotees who built Biodynamics in Britain. They swam against the tide in the important and commendable quest for pure food. There is the heart-broken Daniel Dunlop, the selfless Marna Pease, the tragic Eugen Kolisko, the dogged Lilly Kolisko, the entrepreneurial Karl König, the flighty Eleanor Merry, and the linguistic genius George Kaufmann. Yes, they are all dead by now, but it would have been sweet for them to live again across a few pages instead of arriving dead on arrival as they do in this book.

Publisher

It is clear that the publisher has failed to perform due diligence on the manuscript of the reviewed book. In this failure, the publisher has failed both the author, who is surely well intentioned but neither scholar nor historian, and the public, who are entitled to rely on a published book having proceeded through a due diligence process and can thereby be relied upon. The publisher, Floris Books, damages its reputation by publishing an error-riddled account that creates and sustains false narratives.

This book is a confection of truths and half truths, of fictions, fabrications, falsehoods, and fantasies. An appropriate option is to retract the present incarnation of this book, to then subject the manuscript to rigorous fact-checking and copyediting, and then reissue it as a 'revised edition'. Such a process is not going to transform the account into a great book, but it could aspire to be an adequate book. An alternative is to reclassify the book as 'historical fiction'.

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