

THE KING OF ORGANICS

DR. JOHN PAULL traces the birth of a classic book on sustainable farming and the work of its pioneering author, Franklin King.

FARMERS OF FORTY CENTURIES was a voice from the grave when it first appeared in 1911. The tragedy is that its author, Franklin King, never got to see his book in print, nor to finish it. The triumphs of the tome are that now, on its 100th birthday, it is a classic of organic agriculture and there are currently at least nine impressions available in print, plus several versions for web download.

King was an American professor of agriculture who worked briefly for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) but resigned over what he saw as the USDA's wrong-headed approach. Having watched in frustration as US farmers mined their soils rather than nourishing them, in 1909, King journeyed to China, Japan and Korea to learn the 'secrets' of maintaining soil fertility over centuries.

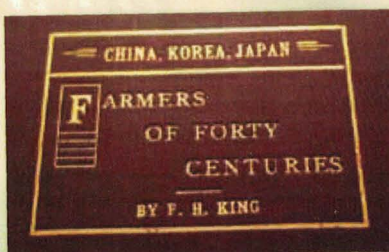
What he discovered is revealed in his book, however the reader must supply the conclusions to be drawn from King's meticulous descriptions of traditional and pre-industrial farming in Asia, before the eras of industrial agriculture and chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

King's unfinished title runs to 442 pages in its first edition. There was no commercial publisher: his widow published the book privately. And there the matter would have rested except that Jonathan Cape, a British publisher, resurrected the book in 1927 and kept it in print for the following two decades. The early references to *Farmers of Forty Centuries* are nearly always to the editions published out of London in those years from 1927 to 1949.

In it, King states: "We had come to learn how the old-world farmers had been able to provide materials for food

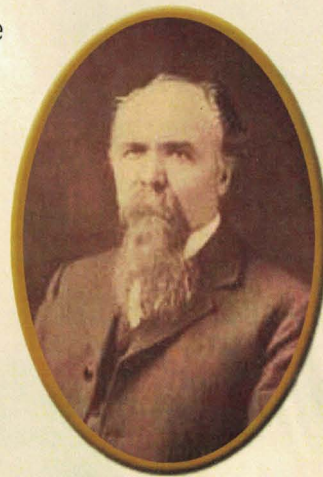
and clothing on such small areas for so many millions, at so low a price, during so many centuries, and were anxious to see them at the soil and among the crops."

King recognised that the prevailing US direction of industrial farming and the championing of reductionist chemical science ignored the wealth of



Top right: Franklin Hiram King as he appears in the 1911 edition of his book. **Above:** Front cover of the first edition of *Farmers of Forty Centuries*.

Right: Traditional threshing on Chongming Island (near Shanghai and at the mouth of the mighty Yangtze River) appears to have changed little since King's visit a century ago. New plans envisage the island as an organic agriculture showplace.



knowledge garnered over many centuries by farmers.

The book, which is subtitled 'Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan', offers a wealth of observations and data on traditional Asian farming practices, including inter-cropping, multi-cropping and green manuring. King called the organic agriculture he witnessed "permanent agriculture". As an agri-tourist King was before his time, and his call for a "world movement" for the promotion of sound agricultural practices was prescient.

Farmers of Forty Centuries is an eye-witness account by a perceptive

observer as well as a work of passion and protest. King's book remains a worthy and enduring legacy of a lifetime devoted to the study of agricultural practices and it has inspired pioneers of organic agriculture. The full text is available for free download at www.gutenberg.org and www.soilandhealth.org. King continues to cast a light on pre-industrial agricultural practices and his book continues to inform and instruct – and, meanwhile, China is now a world leader in organic agriculture.

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