

Book reviews

The Biodynamic Movement in Britain: A History of the First 100 Years

Bernard Jarman

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It is now a hundred years since the magus Rudolf Steiner (1861- 1925), at Whitsun 1924, delivered the lectures of the Agriculture Course from which the practice of biodynamic farming has developed.

He was invited to do so by the Silesian estate-owner Count Carl von Keyserlingk, who, along with some other agriculturalists, had become concerned about decline in seed vitality, livestock health and food quality. Steiner conceived of farms as self-contained evolving organisms, relying for fertility on home-produced compost and manure. Livestock, crops and soil would inter-relate for the benefit of the organic whole. He challenged his audience to develop greater sensitivity to natural processes, thereby creating a new form of farming wisdom. His ideas looked back to the traditional ways of agriculture which were being eroded by industrialised methods, and forward, experimentally, to a greater consciousness of the life forces at work throughout the greater organism of the whole earth.

The phrase 'muck and magic, sometimes applied to organic farming in general by its detractors, should more appropriately be directed in particular at biodynamic methods, with their appeal to etheric forces, attention to the zodiac, and practices such as stuffing chamomile flower heads into cattle intestines. Sir Albert Howard considered that the biodynamic school had failed to demonstrate the value of its theories, while the ruralist H.J. Massingham saw biodynamic practice as a sort of 'white witchcraft', frightening people away by its eccentricity.

Nevertheless, biodynamics have always existed as an esoteric current within the organic movement's broader stream. Biodynamic agriculture has spread worldwide, with more than 250,000 hectares of land, on all continents, cultivated on its principles. The Anthroposophical Agricultural Association (AAF) was established in Britain in 1928, and, after some splintering and reunions along the way, continues its work as the Biodynamic Agricultural Association (BDAA). Bernard Jarman's history is therefore a welcome addition to the study of alternative farming techniques in the UK, written by someone who knows the Steiner movement from the inside. Jarman studied the Agriculture Course in 1978, and during the 1980s and '90s was a member of the BDAA Council, chairing it from 1995 to 2000.

He tells the UK biodynamic movement's story through biographical sketches of several important figures. He is clear that there are plenty of omissions; no doubt the publishers imposed a rigorous word limit. The original impulse to bring biodynamic agriculture to Britain came from the industrialist Daniel Dunlop, an acolyte of the Theosophist Helena Blavatsky. In 1922 Dunlop met Steiner, who had broken away from Blavatsky to form his own 'spiritual science' of Anthroposophy, and invited him to give a series of lectures. (The Evolution of Consciousness) at Penmaenmawr in North Wales the following year. After Steiner's death, Dunlop brought together leading

representatives of Anthroposophy for a World Conference on its practical applications, held in London in July 1928. One area for possible practical application was agriculture, and in November 1928 the AAF was founded. Count Keyserlingk had been unable to attend the July conference and sent in his place his scientific adviser Carl Mirbt (later Mier), who became the AAF'S secretary and worked during the 1930s to increase membership; by 1940 this had reached nearly three hundred. In 1933 Mier and his wife Gertrude settled at Clent in Worcestershire, which was to be a centre of Steinerian activity for many decades.

Another important early figure was Marna Pease, who farmed in Northumberland. Inspired by hearing Steiner at the North Wales lectures she turned to biodynamic methods, but had to give up her farm following her husband's death. She moved to Bray in Berkshire and turned her garden into a showpiece of biodynamic horticulture, while her home became the AAF's headquarters. Jarman awards the title of first biodynamic farmer in Britain to Maurice Wood, a farmer near Leeds who in 1926 came into contact with Anthroposophy, attended the 1928 conference, and was a co-founder of the AAF. By the 1940s he was a specialist in growing and milling biodynamic flour; he was also a founder member of the Soil Association.

Jarman attaches considerable significance to Walter James, the 4th Lord Northbourne; though regrettably he perpetuates the erroneous belief that Northbourne coined the term 'organic farming, something which Northbourne himself explicitly denied.

Northbourne organised a major conference on biodynamics in June 1939, at his East Kent estate; his friend and fellow landowner Gerard Wallop (Viscount Lymington, later the 9th Earl of Portsmouth) wrote enthusiastically of it in his autobiography *A Knot of Roots*, describing it as one of the most exciting weeks he ever spent. The dominant personality was Dr. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, a former electrical engineer who became a disciple of Steiner and encouraged the spread of biodynamic agriculture in Germany and the Netherlands. In 1933 (?) he emigrated to the United States, but during the 1930s attended several gatherings in Britain, where he came to know many of the key figures in the organic movement. Important post-war personalities included Maye Bruce, inventor of the 'Quick Return' composting method, and David Clemerit, who purchased Broome Farm at Clent in Worcestershire, which, together with nearby Sunfield Children's Home, formed a centre of Steinerian activity until the farm was sold in 1986. Clement chaired ... (missing photo detail)

influential were George Corrin, a North Wales market-gardener who edited the *Members' Bulletin* from 1961 to 1985; and John Soper, who had worked for the British Colonial Agricultural Service and developed and adapted Steiner's Agriculture Course for a younger generation.

There are other people worthy of note, for whom Bernard Jarman was - or Floris Books were unable to find space. Laurence Easterbrook, for instance, was a farmer and journalist who visited Marna Pease in the latter capacity, was recommended by her to visit Carl Mier, and found that at Clent the teachings of Steiner came to life for him. He managed to combine his esoteric philosophy with being Public Relations Officer for the

Ministry of Agriculture during the early stages of World War 2; in 1943 he edited *The Future of Farming*, whose contributors included Sir John Russell of Rothamsted, and he wrote the British Council's post-war guide to British Agriculture. He was a long-term member of the Soil Association's Council. Another widely respected figure in the farming world was C. Alma Baker, whose 1940 book *The Labouring Earth* featured an introduction by the former Minister of Agriculture Lord Addison. Addison was sceptical about Baker's Steinerian philosophy, but believed that Baker had nevertheless made a strong case against the progressive orthodoxies of agricultural science. The book was warmly reviewed by *The Times* and *The Field*, among other publications. Thirdly, there was John Davy, who for many years was Science Correspondent of *The Observer*. He was also a dedicated Anthroposophist, and active in the Soil Association, serving on its editorial board in the late 1960s/early 1970s.

Believers in 'muck and magic' these Steinerians may have been, but they were highly capable people. Daniel Dunlop had been first director of the British Electrotechnical and Allied Manufacturers Association; Marna Pease was farm manager of a large estate; Lord Northbourne was governor of the University of London's agricultural college at Wye in Kent, David Clement was three times elected chair of the NFU's local branch; John Soper was awarded the CBE for his work overseas, and C Alma Baker for having founded the Australian and Malayan Battleplane Squadrons during World War 1.

The term 'spiritual science' may appear an example of oxymoron, but those who practised biodynamic methods established an Experimental Circle to study and improve their effects. Some particularly interesting work was undertaken by Lili Kolisko, a former medical laboratory assistant who during the 1930s and '40s developed the technique of capillary dynamolysis, through which patterns created by plant juices are made visible. Plants grown biodynamically produced more coherent and aesthetically appealing patterns than those grown with chemical fertilizers. The biochemist Dr. Anthony Deavin, a Soil Association Council member who helped establish organic standards and was a scientific adviser to Lawrence Hills's Henry Doubleday Research Association, followed in the Koliskos footsteps by exhibiting juices in an exhibition [... **missing ...**] some Scientific Section of the Chelsea Flower Show in 1972. He had undertaken biodynamic training at the Camphill Village Trust in North Yorkshire.

An account of recent developments, such as the Seed Co-operative (Biodynamic and Organic Plant Breeding and Seeds Ltd), founded in 2014, brings the record up to the present. The BDAA has also contributed to the spread of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA encourages members of its co-operatives to play an active part in the lives of their farms, since biodynamic agriculture emphasizes the importance of farming for the greater social good. It is not about individualistic self-sufficiency, as popularized in the 1970s by John Seymour, but about service to others; hence its close links with educational initiatives such as the Camphill Village Trust. The biodynamic philosophy is esoteric, but reaches out to everyone. In his discussion with Bernard Jarman at the launch of Jarman's book, Vivian Griffiths commented particularly on the fact that the biodynamic approach to farming tends to produce communities. The close association at Clent between the Sunfield Agricultural Centre and the Sunfield

Children's Home is a notable instance of this, as is the work at Botton Village in North Yorkshire.

The Biodynamic Movement in Britain provides a valuable starting point for future researchers. Ideally they would be neither acolytes of Steiner (for those of us who are not anthroposophists, Jarman takes a good deal for granted) nor secularists eager to demolish his ideas; an open-minded scepticism might fit the bill. One issue requiring a good deal more analysis is the relationship in Britain between the biodynamic movement and the wider organic movement. As we have seen, there was a significant overlap, but was the biodynamic element in any way essential to the advancement of the organic cause?

On the face of it, the opposite would seem to be the case. If the ideas of even such a respected agriculturalist as Sir Albert Howard were mistrusted by his fellow scientists, the occult philosophy of Rudolf Steiner would certainly have made no headway. Howard's approach was a potential threat to the vested interests of the agricultural chemicals industry, and the campaign that ICI and Fisons launched against organic methods during the 1940s was keen to associate them with an outlook which was primitive and mystical: epithets perhaps more appropriate to biodynamics than to the practices of Howard and his followers. Yet there is no reason, other than prejudice, why scientists should not apply their experimental techniques to the claims of the anthroposophists Experimental Circle. Bernard Jarman's book implicitly presents some intriguing questions, historical and scientific, on which to ponder.

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