

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

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It was one hundred years ago that Rudolf Steiner offered a series of eight lectures at Koberwitz (in Silesia, which today is part of Poland), but aimed at a renewal of agriculture. In response to calls from specialists in different fields, these would, via the tricky path of stenographers notes and subsequent translation, become the foundation of biodynamics. And with weak health in the year before his death it is a miracle this gift reached us at all.

If this sounds a precarious start, the history of biodynamics in Britain has mirrored this, the somewhat tender plant on British soil receiving repeated injections of support from those of European origin. While biographies of people can usually be sketched in an evolving way, it is more problematic for institutions or movements. The advent of two world wars and rival claimants to the banner of Steiner's ideas were of no help! And meanwhile, modern equivalents of the basic questions faced in 1924 challenge us right now.

And so, within a broadly historical frame, the book follows the tracks and relationships of a series of players who first introduced, and then kept Steiner's agricultural impulse alive amid the challenges in Britain of industrial farming and the equally adverse consequences of government policy. Amid all this, an evolving biodynamic association is traced, together with the activity of an Experimental Circle, the seed for which was sown at Koberwitz.

With its European roots, biodynamics in Britain must be grateful for a sprinkling of home-grown pioneers driven by conviction in Steiner's world view. We hear of the role of Daniel Dunlop who, with Eleanor Merry, would arrange for Steiner to visit Britain. Later, a conference in 1928 would be arranged which brought to Britain key work. people who helped create wider awareness of Steiner's work.

At this time, farming and gardening pioneers such as Marna Pease and Maurice Wood had adopted biodynamic principles in England, providing centres of inspiration for others. But among those at the 1928 conference would also be Karl König who, after internment on the Isle of Man during the second world war, founded the Camphill Villages. Importantly, this movement would see biodynamic husbandry adopted at its growing number of centres and thus provide a more sustainable context for its future in both Britain and Ireland.

Of towering importance to biodynamics in both the UK and the USA was Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, who had personally known Steiner and who tirelessly dedicated himself to biodynamics and to researching its efficacy. He would influence many in person and by

his writings, including those who could provide institutional support. Among these was Lord Northborne, whose book *Look to the Land* would influence Lady Eve Balfour and thus help advance the future organic movement in Britain.

Throughout the book, the contributions of a number of women, German and British, are given timely recognition. We learn of the earliest appearance of a biodynamic calendar by Elizabeth Vreede prior to the better-known era of Maria Thun. Then, given the current interest in a vegetarian lifestyle, readers will learn about the composite preparation devised by Maye Bruce (known as QR, a compost starter). This leads into the issue of what can now be permitted as a private initiative as opposed to standard practice based on Steiner's own instruction. From such discussion the reader may ponder the wider issue of how in future, biodynamic preparations can be adapted or interpreted for those far from the European origins of the movement.

There are always limits to the themes that can be fitted within the scope of a single book - and this is quite a short one. However, it is a shame that the important role of the Ruskin Mill Educational Trust (RMET) over the last 25 years, in its adoption, promotion and training of biodynamics, has been omitted. Across a dozen or so centres RMET embraces biodynamic land work as an essential pathway in its approach to rebuilding lives broken by early life difficulties. Given our contemporary social and economic problems this initiative, like Camphill already mentioned, reminds us that biodynamics, as a holistic entity, has potentially higher purpose than simply nurturing the soil and producing healthy food.

Returning to pioneer farmers, they were to exercise important roles in the 1970s and 80s. For its own part, the Biodynamic Association for many years employed a fieldsman to help promote biodynamic practices, a role which would eventually lead to the development of a certification scheme. From this point the book is strangely silent. Demeter Certification, along with other farming interest groups, provides assurance that products have been raised to specific standards. While representing only a proportion of those adopting biodynamic practices, it is through Demeter certification that biodynamics has gained wider recognition in all the British nations over the last 30 years. Here, we are not simply talking of the policing of regulations but the building and maintenance of best practice within what

New View 79

is known as the organic sector. And while Demeter certification has a commercial connotation, it has also brought recognition of biodynamics to a wider public. In this regard I would make the parallel with the grower who needs first to think of where the market is before sowing the crop!

As noted, the book is overweighted towards earlier parts of the last 100 years. In consequence, while all can be embraced as part of our heritage, it may leave a current generation without a sense of direction going forward. Despite this reservation, readers should not overlook the book's Introduction where there is exposition of the place of biodynamics in our world.

Books inevitably represent an author's personal view. We are thus offered a deep and original contribution to the history of biodynamics in Britain, which gains considerably from personal experience. There was much here I had not previously been aware of, while Bernard Jarman's style and gift for biographical writing made that exploration the more enjoyable.

Richard Thornton Smith