The Farm as Organism:
The Foundational Idea of Organic Agriculture

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The term *organic farming* was coined by Oxford University agriculturalist Lord Northbourne, in his book *Look to the Land*, and published in wartime England in 1940. It was a response to what he dubbed *chemical farming*, and from the outset he presented these as two mutually incompatible, and contesting, agricultural methodologies. The terms are introduced in contention: "organic versus chemical farming" in the Chapter 3 heading (Northbourne, 1940, p. 81).

Northbourne's key contribution is the idea of *the farm as organism*. He wrote of "the farm as a living whole" (p.81). In the first elaboration of this concept, he wrote that "the farm itself must have a biological completeness; it must be a living entity, it must be a unit which has within itself a balanced organic life" (p. 96). A farm that relied on "imported fertility … cannot be self-sufficient nor an organic whole" (p.97). For Lord Northbourne "the farm must be organic in more senses than one" (p. 98), and he presents the holistic view that "The soil and the microorganisms in it together with the plants growing on it form an organic whole" (p. 99).

Northbourne was influenced by the thoughts of Rudolf Steiner (1924), and he implemented those ideas on his own estate in Kent. He wrote that: "the *bio-dynamic* method, evolved in accordance with the recommendations of the late Dr. Rudolf Steiner. The ... method has been highly developed in the course of some fifteen years' work on the Continent, and its effectiveness can be said to be proved" (Northbourne, 1940, p. 173). In his bibliography he includes Dr. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer's: *Bio-dynamic Farming and Gardening,* which he describes as an account of Steiner's methods.

The first occurrence of *organic farming* as a distinct phrase appears where he warns: "In the long run, the results of attempting to substitute chemical farming for *organic farming* will very probably prove far more deleterious than has yet become clear. And it is perhaps worth pointing out that the artificial manure industry is very large and well organized. Its propaganda is subtle, and artificials will die hard'" (p. 103). It ap-

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pears again in the Chapter 5 heading "*organic farming* a practical proposition" (p. 148).

Look to the Land begins with an account of "the interdependence of living creatures" (Ch 1 heading, p.1). Northbourne writes of "the uselessness of considering the situation of any man or association of men or geographical unit as if it were isolated from all others… Besides being bound up with the lives of his fellow-men, every man's life is bound up with the lives of innumerable non-human creatures… there is a very real economic and biological linkage, comprehensive and of infinite complexity, between all living creatures in the world" (pp. 1 & 2). In this chapter he introduces the concept of organism: "the mechanism of life is a continuous flow of matter through the architectural forms we know as organisms. The form alone has any life or any organic identity" (p. 3).

Many of the issues that concern, and preoccupy, organic and bio-dynamic farmers of the twenty-first century, were introduced by Northbourne two thirds of a century ago. He identified that food quality is "a very subtle matter involving something more than appearance and taste, and more than the chemical composition as revealed by analysis" (p. 8). For Northbourne "Food of better quality is food which has vitality, individuality, freshness; food which is grown right, not only food that looks right; food which is effective as a vehicle of life and is not either mere stimulant or mere filling" (p. 129). He conceded that "'Vitality' is a very unscientific term" (p. 166). He railed against focussing on cosmetic considerations, "the things that really matter in food [are] those which make it effective as a vehicle of life" (p. 62), and he expressed concern that "real quality is giving way to cheapness" (p. 66).

Northbourne addressed biodiversity and warned against monocultural farming: "large scale monoculture (the growing of one crop only) upsets the balance of factors in the soil in many ways. There is no give and take between crops. Disease spreads easily. Nature always provides a mixture of plants, and of animals; only so can living matter be kept constantly in circulation without wastage" (p. 21).

Localism was already identified as an issue of salience: "it is ludicrous to cart stuff about all over the world, so someone can make a 'profit' out of doing so, when that stuff could much better be produced where it is wanted" (p. 104).

On the limitations of economics he wrote: "we have come to have no idea of profit other than financial profit… the delusion is that cheapness leads to plenty. But what use is plenty of rubbish?" (p. 66). He pointed out that "the relation of financial cost to what may be termed 'biological cost' has not been considered, still less estimated" (p. 28). On farm-gate prices, he lamented "the power and predominance of the

distributive trades, with its accompaniment of a very big difference between the price paid by the consumer and that received by the producer" (p. 37). He was critical of chemical farming as a process of "trading in, or processing of, stolen fertility" (p. 148), and he rued that "soil fertility is being 'mined'" (p. 157).

On the limitations of scientific reductionism: "No chemist has ever analyzed or described in chemical terms a living creature, however humble; and there is not the slightest chance he ever will" (p. 160). He was critical that "'scientific' farming implies farming regulated mainly according to the combined recommendations of the farm economist, with his calculating machines and ledgers, and the chemist" (p. 157). For Northbourne, "farming cannot be treated as a mixture of chemistry and cost accountancy, nor can it be pulled into conformity with the exigencies of modern business, in which speed, cheapness, and standardizing count most. Nature will not be driven. If you try, she hits back slowly, but very hard" (pp. 90 & 91).

Northbourne gives an early and lucid account of the *Precautionary Principle*: "if we waited for scientific proof of every impression before deciding to take any consequential action we might avoid a few mistakes, but we should also hardly ever decide to act at all. In practice, decisions about most things that really matter have to be taken on impressions, or on intuition, otherwise they would be far too late … We have to live our lives in practice, and can very rarely wait for scientific verification of our hypotheses. If we did we should all soon be dead, for complete scientific verification is hardly ever possible. It is a regrettable fact that a demand for scientific proof is a weapon often used to delay the development of an idea" (p. 41).

Looking to the future, Northbourne wrote of "farming of the future" and warned that "it will be left to future generations to pay for our mistakes, but they may not have the wherewithal" (p. 31). Of traditional farming he recorded that "there exist a few people who still cultivate intensively with little trouble from disease, without recourse to specific defensive measures against disease, and without artificial manures, and without the loss of fertility of the soil" (p. 51). He was critical of approaches that are "primarily mechanical and financial" (p. 110). He warned of the "Price paid for the spread of a false philosophy" (p. 110), and proposed that "The forces of death can only be overcome by the forces of life" (p. 110), that "we must relearn how to farm" (p. 113), and that the task ahead may be "a task for generations… A combination of cooperation and individual effort… And those engaged will be fighting a rearguard action for many decades, perhaps for centuries" (p. 115).

Northbourne wrote of *a taste for wildness*: "Good cultivation is always beautiful, but most of us have a taste for wildness as well. It is pleasant that the best cultivation of

all should be that which is not without its touch of wildness, so that it should present that picture of wildness and intimacy in association which is the most attractive picture of all" (p. 169). Northbourne consistently took a holistic view, he was critical of "Modern doctoring" for "seeing only the bits and not the whole" (p. 47), and "seeking that imitation of health which can be a result of the suppression of diseases" (p. 48).

Of the chemical conquistadors he commented "the idea of conquering nature is as sensible as if a man should try to cut off his own head so as to isolate his superior faculties… we have invented a fight between ourselves and nature; so, of course the whole of nature, which includes ourselves as well as the soil, suffers … We have tried to conquer nature by force and by intellect. It now remains for us to try the way of love" (p. 192).

In the UK, Albert Howard adopted Northbourne's terminology, and published *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture* in 1947, the first book with "organic farming" in the title. In the USA, Jerome Rodale (aka Cohen) published *Pay Dirt* in 1945 in which he adopts Northbourne's term *organic farming,* describing it as "the system of agriculture proposed here" and contrasting it with chemical-dependent farming: "systems that depend overly on chemicals, find eventually a hardpacked soil unfriendly to soil organisms" (p. 4). He claimed that "a farm that was run on the organic basis would have a distinct advantage" due to the presence of "the beneficent soil organisms" (p. 211). Rodale published a magazine *The Organic Farmer* from 1949 to 1953 and he is reputed (Conford, 2001) to have published magazines titled *Organic Farming and Gardening* and *Organic Gardening and Farming* in 1942 although no copies appear to be extant (Frey, 2006).

Schofield (1986) noted that Northbourne was the first to use the term *organic farming* and describes his book *Look to the Land* as a "forgotten classic". It has now recently been republished by Sophia Perennis, New York, (2003) and deserves to be well known and well read, the message remains coherent, articulate and timely. Unfortunately, in the reprint the Index and the Bibliography have been omitted; and, curiously, 'navvy' has been changed to 'navy', which will surely mystify readers.

Look to the Land is the canonical work that introduced the term *organic farming,* and the concept of *the farm as organism*. Northbourne went on to introduce many ideas that pepper current discussions of organic and bio-dynamic farming, including farmers' markets, the relationship between food and health, the precautionary principle, the principle of care, the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living things, and warning against mining the fertility of the soil. If we are to attribute the title of father of Organic Agriculture, the title must be given to the fourth Lord Northbourne (Walter James).

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