

A Forum for Organic Husbandry: The *New English Weekly* and Agricultural Policy,

1939–1949

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Abstract

This article identifies the *New English Weekly*, a review of economic, political and cultural issues which ran from 1932 to 1949, as the most important publication in the development of the British organic husbandry movement. It defines this movement and summarizes its various strands, including concern about health and nutrition, rural reconstruction, de-forestation, and the dangers of a mechanistic approach to natural processes, all of which were to be found in the *New English Weekly*. The article concentrates on those strands most concerned with agriculture, and on the period from the outbreak of war to the paper's closure, a decade which saw the movement coalesce and define its philosophy of husbandry. A study of the *New English Weekly* during this period demonstrates that all the major figures in the organic movement could be found in its pages as it dealt with questions of farming policy and food production; the consequences of mechanization; the threat of soil erosion and dwindling fertility; and methods of restoring and maintaining the soil's humus content. Although the paper was not primarily aimed at a farming readership, many of its contributors became founder members of the Soil Association. The years following the *New English Weekly*'s closure saw agricultural policy develop in an entirely different direction from that which it had advocated, but it had played a central role in establishing an environmental philosophy which would make itself heard more strongly from the 1960s onwards.

PRIOR TO the establishment of the Soil Association in 1946, the most important journal in the history of the organic husbandry movement was a 'Review of Public Affairs, Literature and the Arts', founded to propagate the monetary reform doctrines of Social Credit, and including on its editorial board T S Eliot, poet and critic, and P L Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins*.¹ In June 1940 a reader complained to the journal in question, the *New English Weekly* (*NEW*): 'I'm a little suspicious of the "manure-complex" of the N E W... Maybe you're right; but this "vegetation myth and magic" business seems to me to be playing the very devil with Social Credit'.² In retrospect, though,

the *NEW*'s significance will more probably lie in its advocacy of organic farming and its environmental concerns than its commitment to monetary reform. The two movements overlapped considerably, but whereas Social Credit is now a historical curiosity the organic movement has grown in influence.

Before some of the evidence supporting this claim for the *NEW*'s importance is considered, an explanation of the term 'organic husbandry movement' is required. It is used in this article to refer to that group of people who, during the 1930s and 1940s, were concerned about the following perceived issues: rural decline and the imbalance of urban and rural in Britain; agriculture's central importance to national life, and the desirability of greater self-sufficiency; the spectre of soil exhaustion and the need to increase humus; the possible dangers of mechanization and widespread use of artificial fertilizers; the social

¹ Social Credit was an economic theory developed by Major C H Douglas, which attacked the banks' monopoly of credit creation and urged the distribution of a National Dividend to enable all members of the nation to buy the goods which the nation produced. For a full account of its development and ideas, see J L Finlay, *Social Credit: The English Origins*, 1972.

² *New English Weekly* [*NEW*], 27 June 1940, p 124.

benefits of encouraging smaller, mixed, family farms in preference to large-scale commercialized specialist ones; the poor quality of national nutrition, and the relationship between food production methods and health. Underlying all these concerns was the conviction that living processes must be interpreted biologically and ecologically, and that any chemical, mechanistic or purely economic approach to agriculture was at best inadequate and at worst destructive. Human beings should seek through science to understand and work with the natural order, instead of exploiting the environment in order to satisfy ever-increasing demands.

I

This outline demonstrates that the organic movement involved much more than opposition to artificial manures and the Rothamsted approach to fertilizer science. It drew together various concerns which had been gathering strength since the late nineteenth century. Anxiety about the use of artificials had been expressed between 1890 and 1914 by Poore, Elliot and Eiloart, who had warned of the possible dangers of abandoning the 'Rule of Return' of wastes to the soil. As Gould and Marsh have recounted, this period also saw considerable interest in various attempts at rural reconstruction, though the Rural Reconstruction Association itself was not founded until 1926, when the post-war 'Great Betrayal' of farming was followed by severe agricultural depression.³

During the 1920s the health and nutrition strand of the organic movement developed, with Robert McCarrison's

experiments in India on diet, the early days of the Pioneer Health Centre in south London, and the work of Edgar J Saxon in promoting natural health and a wholesome diet through his journal *The Healthy Life* (re-constituted as *Health and Life* in 1934). Following the crisis of 1931 the movement's political and economic aspects grew more prominent. Social Credit was offered as the solution to the nation's ills, and ruralist movements took on a nationalist tinge, opposing liberalism and free trade in favour of a revived peasantry. McCarrison returned to England in the 1930s, as did the agricultural scientist Sir Albert Howard, whose researches in India were central to the organic movement. Throughout the decade he promoted the system of composting whose positive effects on plant and animal health he had demonstrated at the Institute of Plant Industry in the state of Indore. The 1930s also saw develop, through the Anglo-Catholic 'Christendom' movement, a religious philosophy based on the idea of a Natural Order, which, it was argued, provided the justification for obeying the Rule of Return, through which man co-operates with God's creation.⁴

In 1941 a loosely-organized group, the 'Kinship in Husbandry', was formed in order to promulgate this outlook. Called together by the Wessex farmer Rolf Gardiner, it sought 'to percolate many movements', including the Rural Reconstruction Association and, later, the Soil Association. Several key figures in the organic movement were members or guests of the Kinship. In addition to Gardiner these included the landowners Viscount

³ For pre-1914 concern about soil fertility and the possible effects of artificials, see G V Poore, *Essays on Rural Hygiene*, 1893; R H Elliot, *The Clifton Park System of Farming*, 1943; and A Eiloart, *No Plant Disease*, nd [1913 in Bodleian Library catalogue]. For discussions of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century concerns about rural reconstruction and 'back to the land' movements, see P C Gould, *Early Green Politics*, Brighton, 1988, and J Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 1982.

⁴ On McCarrison's experiments in diet, see R McCarrison, *Nutrition and Health*, 1961. On the Pioneer Health Centre, see I H Pearse and L H Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 1943. On ruralist nationalism, see A Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century*, 1989, pp 104-30 and 133-50; R Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, 1983, pp 317-29; G C Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right: 1918-1939*, 1986, pp 57-68; and P Wright, *The Village that Died for England*, 1996, pp 150-202. On Howard's work in India, see L E Howard, *Sir Albert Howard in India*, 1953. For an example of the work of the Christendom Group, see M B Reckitt, ed, *Prospect for Christendom*, 1945.

Lymington (later the Earl of Portsmouth) and Lord Northbourne; the writers Edmund Blunden and H J Massingham; farmer-writers Adrian Bell and Ronald Duncan; the agricultural journalist Laurence Easterbrook; Jorian Jenks, first editorial secretary to the Soil Association; and Philip Mairet, editor of the *NEW* from 1934.⁵ Howard and McCarrison influenced this group, as did Sir George Stapledon, the agronomist and grassland expert, and Dr G T Wrench, who, like Howard and McCarrison, had spent several years in India. Howard also influenced the Wiltshire farmer and racehorse-breeder Friend Sykes and the fenland market-gardener Roy Wilson, both of whom practised and advocated his methods; while McCarrison's studies of nutrition and deficiency diseases influenced the general practitioners Dr K E Barlow and Dr Lionel J Picton, and the founders of the Pioneer Health Centre, Dr G Scott Williamson and Dr Innes Pearse. One other major figure must be mentioned: Lady Eve Balfour, whose 1943 book *The Living Soil* synthesized the ideas of Howard and McCarrison in a form which aroused great interest and made feasible the founding of the Soil Association.

Through his editorship of the *NEW* Mairet provided a forum which enabled a coherent philosophy of 'husbandry' to emerge. Other publications dealt with specific aspects of the organic philosophy: Saxon's *Health and Life*, which concentrated on diet and gardening, with occasional forays into Social Credit; *Trees*, the journal of Richard St Barbe Baker's international association, Men of the Trees; and *Christendom*, which provided the theological perspective. Lymington's short-lived *New Pioneer* represented the extreme right wing of the movement. Howard joined battle with the forces of fertilizer

orthodoxy on their own ground.⁶ But it was only in the pages of the *NEW* that all these strands were brought together and worked into a coherent view of agriculture's nutritional, social and spiritual importance to national life. More comprehensively, the journal's philosophy of husbandry provided a critique of the way in which industrial civilization was treating the natural world.

The *NEW* was founded by A R Orage, who edited it until his sudden death in 1934. When in charge of the journal the *New Age* (from 1908 to 1922) he had been regarded by many as the most brilliant editor of the time. At first an advocate of Guild Socialism, he was converted to Major C H Douglas's panacea, Social Credit, in 1919. He left the *New Age* to spend nearly a decade abroad studying and teaching the esoteric system of G I Gurdjieff. In the wake of the Great Crash of 1929 Orage believed that the subsequent economic crisis 'would be the supreme opportunity for the Douglas criticism and propaganda... He returned to England in 1931, determined either to return to the *New Age*, or if that proved impossible, to found a new paper of his own'.⁷ It did prove impossible, and he founded the *NEW*, which first appeared on 21 April 1932. Mairet, who had known him since 1919, joined the paper as his assistant and succeeded him as editor.

Mairet had lived at two rural communities: C R Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft at Chipping Campden, and the Sussex religious community of Douglas Pepler and the sculptor Eric Gill.⁸ Under his editorship the *NEW* began to show increasing interest in agricultural policy and the associated issues of national health and nutrition.

⁶ See for instance, A Howard, 'The restoration and maintenance of fertility', *J Farmers Club*, February 1937, and 'Experiments with pulverised refuse as a humus-forming agent', *The Fertiliser, Feeding Stuffs and Farm Supplies Journal*, 26 July 1939, pp 401-03.

⁷ P Mairet, *A R Orage - A Memoir*, 1936, p 107.

⁸ See P Mairet, *Autobiographical and Other Papers*, Manchester, 1981, pp 30-40 and 120-28.

⁵ On the Kinship in Husbandry, see R Gardiner, *Water Springing from the Ground*, Fontmell Magna, 1972, pp 196-203, and the Earl of Portsmouth, *A Knot of Roots*, 1965, pp 85-95.

Despite the view of the correspondent quoted at the beginning of this article, these issues never conflicted with the commitment to Social Credit, which argued that economic reform would prevent the destruction of soils and food for the sake of profit and ensure that the whole population would be guaranteed sufficient income to enable them to buy fresh, protective foods.

The *NEW*'s service to the organic cause was so extensive that only certain aspects of it can be indicated here. This article will concentrate on the ten years from the outbreak of the Second World War to the journal's closure in 1949. This was a period of prolific activity and rapid development in the organic movement, which took advantage of wartime interest in agriculture to press its case. Many of the most significant texts in the organic canon were published between 1939 and 1947, and the Soil Association was founded in 1946.⁹ The *NEW* devoted space to all the major figures in the movement, and therefore has a unique importance in its history. It is not feasible here to examine the *NEW*'s treatment of all aspects of the movement; this paper will focus on its coverage of farming policy and food production; mechanization; soil erosion, and the maintenance and restoration of fertility.

II

The *NEW* first appeared when *laissez-faire* agricultural policies were being abandoned after nearly a century of free trade. 1932 saw the imperial conference at Ottawa, the passing of the Wheat Act, and the appointment of the corporatist Walter Elliot as

Minister of Agriculture. The far-reaching Agricultural Marketing Act had been passed the year before and a second would be passed the year after. Other steps to prevent further disasters for the hard-pressed farming community followed as agriculture began to recover. Later in the decade agriculture benefited as the government moved to ensure increased self-sufficiency in the event of war.¹⁰

During the 1930s a number of agriculturalists argued for a coherent and comprehensive policy if British farming were to remain viable. The dominant school of thought was represented most notably by Viscount Astor, Sir Daniel Hall, Keith Murray, C S Orwin and B S Rowntree, who denied the necessity of mixed farming and argued instead for specialization, emphasizing the importance of an efficient commodity production to be achieved through scientific advance, mechanization, and new management methods. If such methods were to be adopted farming units would need to be larger and peasant farmers would gradually disappear. The optimistic mood is exemplified by Astor and Rowntree:

the tempo of invention and discovery has been enormously quickened during the last thirty years, so that the present era is sometimes referred to as the period of 'The Second Agricultural Revolution', and the methods of farming being evolved as a result of recent research work are referred to as 'The New Technique'.¹¹

The organic school shared Astor and Rowntree's concern for the future of agriculture, but the use of the word 'technique' in the above quotation indicates the difference between the two approaches. For supporters of organic husbandry agriculture was essentially an art, or a form of care,

⁹ See, for instance: G V Jacks and R O Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth*, 1939; A Howard, *An Agricultural Testament*, 1940; Lord Northbourne, *Look to the Land*, 1940; H J Massingham, ed, *England and the Farmer*, 1941; K E Barlow, *The Discipline of Peace*, 1942; the Earl of Portsmouth, *Alternative to Death*, 1943; F C King, *Gardening with Compost*, 1944; H J Massingham, ed, *The Natural Order*, 1945; L J Picton, *Thoughts on Feeding*, 1946; F Sykes, *Humus and the Farmer*, 1946; and L T C Rolt, *High Horse Riderless*, 1947.

¹⁰ For a survey of agricultural policy during the 1930s, see J Brown, *Agriculture in England: A Survey of Farming, 1870-1947*, Manchester, 1987; A F Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy 1912-1936: A Study in Conservative Politics*, Manchester, 1989; and E H Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, VIII, 1914-39*, 1978.

¹¹ Viscount Astor and B Seebohm Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, Harmondsworth, 1939, p 403.

not a matter of applying a technological or managerial principle for the sake of efficiency. The outbreak of war in 1939 provided, in their view, an opportunity for Britain to establish agriculture at the heart of its economy and society. It was therefore vital to adopt an entirely new policy towards the land, 'in which renewal of fertility as well as a square deal for farmer and labourer would be assured'. Those still of an 'urban mind' would have to be convinced that 'a fertile soil is the nation's greatest possession'. The distinguished agriculturalist Lord Bledisloe, who sympathized with the organic school, wrote a long letter to the *NEW* in which he urged the entire reconstruction of the agricultural industry. Although reluctant to support nationalization, he suggested the conversion of free-holds into 999-year leaseholds, with covenants on the use of land for the optimum advantage of the British public. Another prominent enthusiast for reconstruction was Sir Daniel Hall, whose book *Reconstruction and the Land* was mauled by H J Massingham in a review entitled 'Farms as Firms'. In Massingham's view Hall's assumptions were those of profit-making and industrialism; the state's interests seemed indistinguishable from those of a joint-stock company. Massingham condemned Hall as 'anti-organic', and argued that he opposed mixed farming even though his book contained a table showing the highest production per acre to be in countries where mixed farming was common.¹²

From the organic perspective the interest in agricultural reconstruction was therefore not without its darker side. The *NEW*'s 'Notes of the Week', under the sub-heading 'Red Light over Agriculture', drew attention to the 'commercial rationalizers' who were 'muscling in to this agricultural business'. There was danger of a post-war

'planning' which would condemn farmers as inefficient and recommend that they should 'be superseded by "scientific" commissars running big collective farms with more machinery and chemicals'. Ronald Duncan, who contributed a 'Husbandry Notes' column for much of the war, pointed out in a letter that farms in Wiltshire – large-scale, mechanized, and using artificials – produced less wheat per acre than small, mixed farms in north Devon still using horse-ploughs. A reviewer, J J (presumably Jorian Jenks), agreed there was a danger of too much planning, but excepted the case of land utilization because 'it seems imperative that there should be a definite, authoritative and (as far as possible) agreed design to which all must conform'. Britain would have to adopt a simpler way of life, relying more on her own resources. The danger, in the eyes of the organic school, was that 'efficient' husbandry might mean sacrificing soil fertility. Preferring to measure efficiency in terms of output per acre rather than output per man, the *NEW* argued for a maximum-production policy which would require one million more land workers.¹³

Well before the war ended the journal was trying to anticipate the post-war situation. It believed food shortages and the threat of famine to be likely, particularly in the conquered countries; but Montague Fordham of the Rural Reconstruction Association warned that agriculture had been betrayed after the First World War and that its importance was likely to be forgotten once the Second ended. For Jenks, on the other hand, the more probable danger was the '*a priori* type of economist whose model is the industrial system'. Industrial models of efficiency aimed to minimize both the wages and the numbers of those employed, but Jenks believed that

¹² *NEW*, 25 April 1940, pp 3-4; 29 Aug 1940, p 215; 1 Jan 1942, pp 93-94.

¹³ *NEW*, 12 March 1942, p 183; 18 Feb 1943, pp 155-56; 21 Jan 1943, p 116; 24 Feb 1944, pp 155-56.

after the war the government would be well advised to offer good terms to the workers in mining, fishing and agriculture. Reviewing Massingham's *Men of Earth*, S Sagar said that the chief question it raised was, 'What is going to happen to rural England? I know farmers think they are going to be once more sold down the river... I do not think we shall be able to let England return again to weeds and scrub... The land of England will have to be worked. The question is how. Will it be by mechanized scamping? If so, our last state will be worse than the present one'. Evidence from the United States was adduced by Bernard Raymond of Ohio, supporting Sagar's view. He reported that in 1943 yield per acre in that state was down for all principal crops, but that 'Washington continues to insist that the mechanization of agriculture is the answer to the labour problem on the farm'.¹⁴

In Britain the war led to a rapid increase in mechanization and the use of artificial fertilizers. Influential voices, like that of Sir Daniel Hall, supported concepts of efficiency based on the measure of output per man, and on the creation of larger farming units. The *NEW* did what it could to oppose these trends in the post-war years. 'Notes of the Week' for 4 July 1946 provide a clear statement of the *NEW*'s stance on post-war agricultural policy. The job of the Ministry of Agriculture was

to have clear and correct knowledge of the functions of agriculture both in human economy as a whole and in the national economy, and to have a policy that will secure, defend and assist the agriculturists to fulfil those functions. In present circumstances, that means a policy which can reconcile modern civilization with the immemorial and indispensable functions of husbandry.

British agriculture depended on the aid of nearly a quarter of a million overseas workers; but since, argued the writer of the 'Notes', the countryside was not merely

for leisure, our own land must be used for production. Referring to the ministers of state responsible for post-war policy, the writer posed the question: 'Will they be possessed by the technological mania, and try to "industrialize nature" – flatten the hedgerows, multiply tractors, try to mechanize and chemicalize everything and to multiply yield per man hour regardless?'¹⁵

Philip Oyler, a member of the Kinship in Husbandry, argued for a very different policy. In his view, everything possible should be done to increase both fertility and the use of manpower, with towns obliged to return wastes to the land for the sake of intensive cultivation. Land settlement should be encouraged. Oyler, who was to write books on French peasant farming, cited the example of the French Revolution, suggesting that workers be given land rather than higher wages. He argued that output per acre was highest on mixed farms from 50 to 100 acres in size, and that Orwin, Astor and Rowntree were encouraging an approach which would increase soil erosion.¹⁶

The prospect of food shortages continued to haunt the *NEW*'s views on agricultural policy. The pseudonymous columnist 'Pontifex III' insisted: '— the World is short of food and... the prospect is for increased stringency, until a revolutionary change of attitude and practice in agricultural production has occurred and made considerable progress'. 'Notes of the Week', discussing the Agriculture Bill, referred scathingly to the 'confidence of our economists that industrial civilization will always be able to get cheap foodstuffs by ravaging the fertility of one area and then of another'.¹⁷ 'Pontifex III' referred in the autumn of 1947 to the financial dimension of European food shortages:

The World Food Council draws urgent attention to these physical facts, as well as to their aggravation

¹⁴ *NEW*, 3 July 1941, pp 108–10; 25 Feb 1943, p 162; 10 Feb 1944, pp 137–38; 30 March 1944, p 202; 27 April 1944, pp 16–17.

¹⁵ *NEW*, 4 July 1946, pp 114–15.

¹⁶ *NEW*, 25 July 1946, pp 144–45.

¹⁷ *NEW*, 2 Jan 1947, p 112; 3 July 1947, p 101.

by the exchange instability which is preventing mutual marketing of local surpluses across European frontiers. They give warning that 'dollar shortages will mean a reduction of acreages in the producer countries and an extension of the crisis beyond next year's harvest'.¹⁸

In the view of the organic school, Britain could no longer rely on overseas countries, since those countries were themselves now industrializing and would be less interested in importing our manufactured goods. It followed that 'the only way for each currency area to be sure of its food is to grow it'. In doing so, however, it was essential to avoid over-taxing the land's productive capacity. The *NEW* feared 'State farms run upon industrial ideas', which would result in a 'disastrous... fall in productivity per man per acre'. But it saw Business as equally destructive, as Carey McWilliams's book on United States migrant workers, *Ill Fares the Land*, demonstrated. Reviewing it, Reginald Snell wrote of Business's 'ignorant pursuit of mechanization and monoculture, and the consequent debilitation and erosion of good farm land'. The fundamental threat was any system of 'large economic farm units', since they destroyed family farming. In a letter to the *NEW* H J Massingham referred to R M Lockley's book *The Island Farmers*, which had praised family farms for their high productivity. Massingham's first contribution to the *NEW* had referred to a 'diseased' economic system. As the paper drew to its close he applied the same epithet to Britain's farming: 'No agriculture can possibly be other than diseased when it... moves or stagnates at the whim and dictate of a centralized industrialism'.¹⁹

To the last, the *NEW* attributed farming's problems to the dominance of industry and finance, rejected purely economic assessments of agricultural efficiency, and saw the future in terms of an increased

rural population practising intensive husbandry in the interests of national self-sufficiency.

III

During a protracted debate with John Middleton Murry in the *NEW*'s correspondence columns, H J Massingham insisted that 'output per man' was an industrial criterion of measurement, by which standard a depopulated countryside would be more efficient than one where there was intensive employment of labour.²⁰ Since the *NEW* was concerned about the decline of rural life, it tended to be hostile to machines, whose numbers expanded rapidly during the war. Between 1938 and 1946 the number of tractors used rose from about 70,000 to 179,000; and whereas in 1933 a mere 33 combine-harvesters were in use, by 1946 this had risen dramatically to more than 3000.²¹

The *NEW*'s attack on mechanization gathered momentum slowly; indeed, the first issue struck a note of optimism. 'The fundamental problem... is one of Money', it declared, 'since Science has settled every other'. Shortly before the war, though, signs of unease manifested themselves. A correspondent drew attention to a speech by Mr D R Bomford, of the Bomford Brothers agricultural engineering firm, to the Royal Society of Engineers, in which he had advocated increased use of diesel tractors and inorganic manures. Another correspondent wrote of the dangers of such a policy: loss of fertility, control of food production by the few, and increased unemployment. B A Keen, assistant director at Rothamsted research station, wrote to the *NEW* to say that the trend of industry in general was to have fewer workers, and agriculture would not be

¹⁸ *NEW*, 9 Oct 1947, p 196.

¹⁹ *NEW*, 16 Oct 1947, p 2; 5 June 1947, p 66; 29 Nov 1945, pp 65-66; 9 Sept 1948, p 204; 21 April 1932, p 21; 19 May 1949, p 67.

²⁰ *NEW*, 9 June 1949, p 107.

²¹ See K Blaxter and N Robertson, *From Dearth to Plenty*, 1995, p 62, and HMSO, *A Century of Agricultural Statistics: Great Britain 1866-1966*, 1968, pp 61 and 71.

exempt. Such an argument was guaranteed to strengthen the organic school's conviction that agriculture must not be regarded as an industry.²²

Rolf Gardiner reviewed Captain R. G. M. Wilson's pamphlet *I Believe: An Appeal for the Land*, an attack on mechanized, chemical farming by a disciple of Sir Albert Howard. Gardiner's views on rural restoration provoked debate with a certain Mrs Gladys Bing. Referring in particular to the flax industry, he saw mechanization as wasteful in comparison with manual methods, and argued that the machine is only a tool and should be subject to wider considerations. Certainly, machines were useful for breaking up derelict land, but once that had been done care and organic manure were essential. Mrs Bing, with thirty years of rural work behind her, did not dispute the importance of soil fertility, but dismissed Gardiner's vision of communal manual labour as unrealistic, saying that 'pretty pictures of happy families singing as they sweat are mere wishful thinking'.²³

The organic school defined the issue as whether farming was to be seen as a cultural activity or a form of industrial production. If the latter, they argued, the logical conclusion was to apply industrial standards of efficiency to the methods used, increase the use of machinery at the expense of animals and men, and replace the lost fertility with chemical manures. For the organic school this was courting disaster by basing policy on a philosophical error, that of conceiving of Nature mechanistically. In Jorian Jenks's view 'mechanitis' was one of the 'Diseases of Our Time'. 'Notes of the Week' accepted that profligate use of natural resources had occurred in all ages, but argued that 'the results of it have been magnified out of all proportion by modern power-techniques'. We were in danger of

developing a mechanized food production 'driven on at a breakneck pace, with tractors, bull-dozers, combine-harvesters and every outrage that mass-mechanism can perpetrate upon normal husbandry'. The costs of such a system would outweigh the benefits, since it would create unemployment. 'Some people entertain a comfortable illusion that machinery is taking the most toilsome work out of agriculture; which might be true if mechanization meant adding the machines to the men instead of substituting them. And in England agriculture is mainly the work of small and moderate sized farms'; farms which the use of machinery would render diminishingly viable. One contributor to the *NEW* suggested that, paradoxically, mechanization could work against industry. Paul Derrick, a socialist and agricultural trade union official, pointed out that many rural communities could no longer support light industry because mechanization had reduced the local population. The 1948 Economic Survey 'regarded agriculture as one of the under-manned industries'.²⁴

The final phase of the *NEW*'s existence was marked by a prolonged debate on the role of the machine in agriculture, as John Middleton Murry engaged with H. J. Massingham in response to comments by the latter in a review of Martin Thornton's *Rural Synthesis*. Massingham considered Thornton to have too much faith in the machine, which provoked Murry to complain of 'arbitrary anathemas against the "artificial" - machine or manure'. Massingham held that although machines were not in themselves bad they were, unlike nature, standardized and inflexible, with the effect of encouraging large-scale extensive farming. In his turn, Murry referred to the use made of machinery by Friend Sykes and Sir George Stapledon. The countryside indeed

²² *NEW*, 21 April 1932, p 2; 23 Feb 1939, p 308; 25 May 1939, p 100; 2 March 1939, pp 323-24.

²³ *NEW*, 24 July 1941, pp 143-44; 21 Aug 1941, pp 179-80; 4 Sept 1941, pp 195-96.

²⁴ *NEW*, 31 Aug 1944, pp 152-53; 24 April 1947, p 10; 10 July 1947, p 111; 23 Sept 1948, p 217; 30 Dec 1948, pp 137-38.

required fertile land cultivated by contented workers, but an experimental approach to farming techniques would lead to a more appropriate use of machinery.²⁵

IV

The world survey of soil erosion, *The Rape of the Earth*, by G V Jacks and R O Whyte, was one of the organic movement's key texts. Although erosion was not a serious issue in Britain, the American 'Dust Bowl' and the erosion evident in parts of the Empire, particularly Africa, were seen as an ominous warning of what could happen if the soil were over-exploited. The year after the book appeared, G V Jacks wrote for the *NEW* on 'Soil and Soil Evolution', suggesting that Britain was living off reserves of fertility built up over several centuries. For Dr K E Barlow this implied that we 'must impose a limit to industrial expansion'. An article by J J Zeal (quite possibly Jorian Jenks, who spent much of the 1920s in New Zealand) described in detail the destruction of soil in New Zealand, and referred also to the United States, Canada, Russia and Australia.²⁶

Proposals in 1943 by the United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture were likely, in the *NEW*'s opinion, to exacerbate the threat of soil erosion. Its report stated that industrial expansion must precede the long-term rehabilitation of agriculture; in other words, commented Jorian Jenks, the conference wanted to flog the earth still further and remove barriers to international trade, barriers which had been 'one of the very few forms of protection which the soil has had'. The Earl of Portsmouth, like most members of the organic school, blamed commercial and financial interests for soil erosion. According to S Sagar, reviewing Portsmouth's *Alternative to*

Death, it was 'one of the main arguments of the book that it is because the soil has, in effect, been run by the centralized power of international finance that it is now running away with such alarming rapidity in America, Canada, Australia and elsewhere'.²⁷

Beyond the economic issues Barlow identified a religious dimension: 'The dismal story of soil erosion is a reminder of the sanctions which Natural Law can and does impose upon the law breaker'. A long-term view of resource use was required: one in accordance with respect for Natural Law. 'Farming systems which exploit the soil are laying up great trouble and expense for the future, but in the short run their costs are cheaper than those of farming systems which aim at putting back into the land what is taken from it'.²⁸

Soil erosion was a serious problem in South Africa, and, as in the United States, it had become evident that a national effort was required in order to restore fertility before damage proved irreparable. Reviewing H H Bennett's *Soil Erosion and Land Use in South Africa*, Sir Albert Howard attributed the problem to 'the plundering instincts of Western people'. Peoples who exploited and ruined soils did not deserve, in the *NEW*'s opinion, to be considered 'progressive'; a progressive civilization was 'one that does not consume all it produces, one that does not live hand-to-mouth, but, with respect for the past and care for the future, it accumulates "capital"'. A true economy would not squander soil fertility for the sake of short-term profit. J A Chapman's review of Wrench's book *Reconstruction By Way of the Soil*, a wide-ranging survey of different civilizations' attitudes to man's fundamental resource, was entitled 'Mankind as Prodigal Son'.²⁹

The post-war period witnessed the débâcle of the Groundnuts Scheme in East

²⁵ *NEW*, 19 May 1949, pp 67-68; 2 June 1949, p 89; 9 June 1949, pp 107-08; 28 July 1949, pp 190-91.

²⁶ *NEW*, 1 Aug 1940, pp 179-80; 29 Aug 1940, p 213; 25 June 1942, pp 84-85.

²⁷ *NEW*, 26 Aug 1943, pp 137-38; 18 Nov 1943, p 41.

²⁸ *NEW*, 8 June 1944, p 69; 23 Nov 1944, p 48.

²⁹ *NEW*, 21 Feb 1946, p 181; 4 April 1946, p 239; 3 Oct 1946, p 206.

Africa, and the *NEW* was predictably sceptical about such super-imposed monocultural methods, forecasting a biological backlash. Rolf Gardiner, who knew Africa well, reported severe erosion in Uganda and Nyasaland, while there were fears that the interior of South Africa too would become a wasteland. Gardiner referred to the way in which husbandry was now becoming a live issue, referring to various bodies who were working for 'the maintenance of balance in the work of landscape development and a strenuous fight against waste and destruction of all sorts'. 'Pontifex III' predicted that 'all, and more than all, that has been extracted at the expense of the native populations and of the soil will have to be repaid and replaced'. Africa's situation was desperate 'unless and until her peoples learn to care for and cherish her poor soil as devotedly as they now grub beneath it for gold and diamonds'. Another correspondent wrote of the 'mischievous effect of modern short-term cash crop methods upon fertility' and of 'the disastrous effect of chemical, non-humus fertilizers upon soil fertility'. The *NEW* pointed out that even the *Economist* was forced to note the continued soil erosion in the mid-western United States.³⁰

In the view of 'Notes of the Week' the 'rape of the Earth' had become a 'world disease', and they paid tribute to the late President Roosevelt, whose 'name is written in history for his initiation of flood and erosion control in the USA, as surely as for his contribution to the defeat of the Hitlerian revolution'. For Sir John Boyd Orr, soil erosion was a greater threat to human existence than the atomic bomb.³¹

V

Sir Albert Howard was the most influential advocate of humus farming. 'Pontifex III',

in his obituary of Howard, described him as the man who 'led the world in the constructive alternative to artificial fertilizers', and revealed that Howard had from 1936 onwards 'often and generously contributed to this journal, as a specialist writer, reviewer and adviser'.³² The first signs of the 'manure-complex' appeared about a year after Howard began his association with the paper, and the case for humus was represented with increasing frequency during the war, as a reaction to the rapidly developing use of artificial fertilizers.

Use of artificials had remained fairly constant, at a low level, between the wars; indeed, Lord Bledisloe commented, in his foreword to the 1936 symposium *Profit from Fertilizers*: 'Many of our land cultivators, however, use fertilizers in but small quantity, if at all'.³³ Nor was the value of farmyard manure and humus denied: the Ministry of Agriculture Bulletin *Manures and Manuring*, prepared by H V Garner of Rothamsted, insisted that although artificials were 'an essential feature of modern farming', dung was necessary as the means by which 'the land is lifted to a higher plane of fertility and a solid foundation is laid for the action of the inorganic fertilizers that may be required to meet the immediate needs of heavy crops'.³⁴ In the view of the organic school, though, the most effective creation of soil fertility was achieved by the oriental peasants described in F H King's *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, to whom artificials were unknown.³⁵ Any agricultural policy which encouraged a break from the Rule of Return of wastes to the soil was to be regarded with suspicion.

Nevertheless, the correspondence columns did grant some space to defenders of artificials. A H Brown wrote of his success with them, claiming that crops could be

³² *NEW*, 30 Oct 1947, p 20.

³³ H V Garner *et al.*, *Profit from Fertilizers*, 3rd ed, 1948, p 5; see also D Grigg, *English Agriculture: An Historical Perspective*, 1989, pp 72-73.

³⁴ HMSO, *Manures and Manuring*, 1938, pp 2 and 9.

³⁵ F H King, *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, 1927.

³⁰ *NEW*, 25 Dec 1947, pp 105-06; 21 April 1949, p 17; 3 July 1947, p 102; 23 Oct 1947, p 16; 20 Nov 1947, p 52.

³¹ *NEW*, 4 Nov 1948, pp 39-40; 16 Dec 1948, p 117.

grown indefinitely through 'sensible manuring with balanced fertilizers'. Sir Albert Howard quickly counterattacked, saying that artificials became simply unnecessary when humus was applied to the land.³⁶

Rothamsted celebrated its anniversary in 1943, and the *NEW* took the opportunity to publish an article by Jorian Jenks on 'The Great Humus Controversy'. Jenks was not an uncompromising opponent of artificials; he saw them as a valuable supplement to, though in no way a substitute for, muck and compost. What he disliked was the attempt to force up output without increasing expenditure on manpower. 'Many farmers view with profound misgiving the double boost given to the use of nitrogenous stimulants by the chemical combine and the Ministry of Agriculture'. Howard wrote in to support Jenks's argument, casting doubt on the validity of Rothamsted's 'Broadbalk' experiments by pointing out that the field plots had new seed every year. He believed that without the fresh seed the wheat would have lost the power to reproduce after about twenty-five years.³⁷

The 'great humus controversy' reached the House of Lords in the autumn of 1943, when noble sympathizers with the organic movement – Lords Bledisloe, Glentanar, Portsmouth, Teviot and Warwick – criticized the Ministry of Agriculture's policy on artificials. 'Pontifex III' quoted and commented on part of the reply given by the Duke of Norfolk, joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture:

'I wish to deprecate any suggestion of antagonism between chemical fertilizers and humus. There is no evidence that a *balanced use* of fertilizers has a harmful effect on soil, crops or man' (my italics) or, I might add, on the influence and profits of the ICI.³⁸

A fortnight later 'Notes of the Week' returned to this debate. An unnamed

correspondent had written saying that he had used no chemicals for several years but was now being ordered to do so by the local agricultural committee. The writer of the 'Notes' scented collusion between the government and the fertilizer manufacturers. Similarly, Rolf Gardiner considered chemical combines to be fostering the view that humus was not necessary. 'Pontifex III' referred to another organic farmer concerned about government pressure: Friend Sykes had written an article for the *News Letter on Compost* saying that he was resisting the Ministry of Agriculture's encouragement to produce excessive amounts of milk and stimulate the soil by means of chemical agents.³⁹

The *NEW* reviewed many of the important works which were published during the war. Stapledon analysed Lady Balfour's *The Living Soil* sympathetically, though not uncritically; he felt she was too lyrical about the balance of Nature and overlooked the fact that the highest degree of fertility is likely to be found in man-made soils. He noted that she attached more weight to Howard's writings than to 'the researches of the more orthodox of the soil chemists and bio-chemists'. But he also stressed our ignorance of all the factors in the environment that affect us and our health, and said it would be unscientific to assume Lady Eve was wrong. Stapledon also reviewed Gardiner's *England Herself*. W T S (presumably W T Symons) reviewed Northbourne's *Look to the Land*. Massingham's symposium *England and the Farmer* received a mixed review from the Nietzschean A M Ludovici, but his later symposium *The Natural Order* received wholehearted approval from the Revd Joseph Dalby. Portsmouth's *Alternative to Death* was reviewed, as we have seen, by S Sagar; Portsmouth's remedy for civilization's ills was to recognize human depen-

³⁶ *NEW*, 2 Oct 1941, p 232; 9 Oct 1941, p 243.

³⁷ *NEW*, 25 Feb 1943, pp 161–62; 11 March 1943, pp 183–84.

³⁸ *NEW*, 4 Nov 1943, p 23.

³⁹ *NEW*, 18 Nov 1943, p 38; 16 July 1942, p 114; 30 Nov 1944, p 55.

dence on the soil and return humus to it.⁴⁰ This emphasis on the Rule of Return can be found in all the above works.

The same approach continued in the post-war period. Howard's edition of Darwin's writings on the earthworm was reviewed shortly after the European war ended, and his major survey of the organic movement's philosophy and development, *Farming and Gardening for Health or Disease*, was reviewed a few months later. The paper also granted space to a book critical of the humus school, Donald P Hopkins' *Chemicals, Humus, and the Soil*, which Stapledon reviewed. The review elicited a letter from Massingham, urging that we should be 'over-cautious in accepting the claims of chemists to order and control the forces of life', and reminding readers that artificials had been seen by the landowner R H Elliot as a form of decadence. What was essential was a 'healthy organic soil'.⁴¹

Friend Sykes's first book, *Humus and the Farmer* was reviewed by J J (presumably Jorian Jenks), who praised Sykes's methods for having 'a much sounder basis than has most of the scientific advice and technical instruction now so widely publicized as the future salvation of agriculture'. A fortnight later Howard referred to Sykes's book, and offered another successful example of organic methods, Newman Turner's farm in Somerset. Howard was an enthusiast for municipal composting as a means of creating humus, and an article on this topic, entitled 'Sewage, Salvage, Soil and Sanity', was contributed by Cecil D Bachelor, who argued that there would be no need to import artificial fertilizers if more councils followed the lead of those which were de-hydrating, pulverizing, and bagging sewage sludge. Six hundred thousand tons of sludge, produced each year, plus com-

posted waste-matter, could make six million tons of compost annually, he said.⁴²

Finally, it should be noted that the *NEW* covered the establishment of the Soil Association, 'Pontifex III' devoting a paragraph to its aims:

The Soil Association, whose inaugural Meeting was held in London on May 30, presided over by Lady Eve Balfour, gives promise of thorough investigation into the basic principles of agricultural production, and the steady publication of the findings of its research into the basic requirements of fertility and quality in plants and animals, and the resistance of both to pests and diseases.

The paragraph went on to give the association's address and to refer to its forthcoming journal.⁴³ The drive for humus-based fertility enjoyed consistent support in the pages of the *NEW*.

VI

What with the founding of the Soil Association and the plethora of books on organic husbandry published during and shortly after the war, the organic movement would have been justified, in the late 1940s, in feeling optimistic about its future; yet by the mid-1950s the tide was flowing strongly away from it. Important figures had died in the meantime: Howard in 1947, Picton in 1948, Massingham in 1952, and Scott Williamson in 1953. Portsmouth grew increasingly disillusioned with Britain and spent more time abroad. Stapledon entered a long period of invalidism. The Pioneer Health Centre closed in 1951, and Dr K E Barlow failed, in the post-war years, to establish a similar project in Coventry.⁴⁴ The *NEW* could no longer survive financially and closed in September 1949.

⁴² *NEW*, 13 June 1946, p 90; 27 June 1946, p 111; 26 Feb 1948, pp 192-93.

⁴³ *NEW*, 20 June 1946, p 96.

⁴⁴ See the Earl of Portsmouth, *A Knot of Roots*, pp 211-12. On the closure of the Pioneer Health Centre, see C Ward, 'Fringe benefits', *New Statesman and Society*, 29 Sept 1989, p 33. On the Coventry Family Health Club, see K Barlow, *Recognising Health*, 1988, pp 112-19.

⁴⁰ *NEW*, 9 Dec 1943, pp 66-67; 27 Jan 1944, p 121; 13 June 1940, p 94; 16 Oct 1941, p 250; 22 Feb 1945, pp 144-45; 18 Nov 1943, pp 41-42.

⁴¹ *NEW*, 12 July 1945, p 115; 17 Jan 1946, pp 133-34; 14 March 1946, pp 212-13; 28 March 1946, pp 235-36.

More important were the developments in national agricultural policy. Members of the organic movement welcomed the security which the 1947 Agriculture Act gave farmers; but in their view the implications of its approach to productivity were ominous, since it continued on the path of efficiency measured by output per man, with concomitant increase in mechanization and use of artificials, and decrease in the number of small, mixed farms. The number of agricultural workers, which had risen during the war, resumed its long-term downward trend, entering a period of particularly rapid decline in the 1950s. Between 1946 and 1958 the number of tractors being used in England and Wales increased from 179,846 to 430,805, and of combine-harvesters from 3253 to 39,890. In 1946 just over half-a-million horses were used in agriculture, but by 1958 they were no longer regularly enumerated in the annual agricultural census.⁴⁵

Application of inorganic fertilizers had approximately doubled during the war. 'There is little doubt', state Blaxter and Robertson, 'that the increased use of fertilizers contributed greatly to the increased farming output during the Second World War'.⁴⁶ This trend continued after the war, whereas 'the use of farmyard manure declined after 1945; indeed in some parts of England the disposal of dung has become a problem'.⁴⁷ According to David Grigg, 'the decline of the small farms and the increasing dominance, in terms of land occupied, of the large farm, is the principal structural change' of the forty years from the late 1940s.⁴⁸ A more recent – and considerably less detached – writer on post-1947 policy, Graham Harvey, sees the results of the Agriculture Act as catastrophic. In particular he regrets the loss of

the smaller, mixed farm, referring approvingly to the descriptions of such farms which H J Massingham wrote in the 1940s, and which compared the yeoman husbandman favourably with the industrial farmer.⁴⁹

However, the greater crop yields of the post-war decades and the increased efficiency of British agriculture suggested that technology rather than husbandry held the key to ever-expanding productivity. In contrast with the buoyant mood of mainstream farming the Soil Association journal *Mother Earth*, edited until his death in 1963 by Jorian Jenks, would have appeared over-cautious and irrelevant. The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* that year suggested, though, that such caution might after all have been justified.

It is unlikely that many people even in the organic movement itself know of the journal which first provided a forum for the movement's founders. The *NEW* was not registered with the Audit Bureau of Circulation Ltd, and a valedictory article in September 1949 admitted, 'The circulation it can attain is limited'.⁵⁰ Philip Mairet wrote in the same issue:

Our work has been of wider effect than the provision of a place for intelligent comment and controversy, or of a seed-bed for ideas. Some of the causes we have espoused have drawn a vital strength from our weekly insistence, which has promoted action upon them elsewhere. They will go on, and we shall presumably find ways to continue to serve them.⁵¹

It has not been possible here to examine the *NEW*'s coverage of health and nutrition, rural life, or forestry, but its contribution to the cause of organic farming should be clear. Its contributors went out to preach, debate, and advise; and Barlow, Gardiner, Jenks, Massingham,

⁴⁵ Grigg, *English Agriculture*, p 144; HMSO, *Century*, p 71; Blaxter and Robertson, *Dearth*, p 28.

⁴⁶ Blaxter and Robertson, *Dearth*, p 80.

⁴⁷ Grigg, *English Agriculture*, p 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p 120.

⁴⁹ G Harvey, *The Killing of the Countryside*, 1997, pp 107–8.

⁵⁰ *NEW*, 8 Sept 1949, p 205.

⁵¹ *NEW*, 8 Sept 1949, p 207.

Picton, Portsmouth, Sykes, and Scott Williamson were founder-members of the Soil Association. In this, and in other ways, they gave impetus to the theory and prac-

tice of organic husbandry. When the full history of the movement's development is written, the *New English Weekly's* role will demand a central place.

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