The Global History of Organic Farming

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50 or 60 years ago the market for organic food (as now defined) was vanishingly small, less than 0.1 per cent of the market in European countries, according to one estimate. Organic farming at that time was derided by most farmers in the UK as a matter of ‘muck [i.e. farmyard manure] and mystery’. Today, in contrast, as many as two thirds of food consumers in the UK and Germany may regularly buy one or more organic products. The expansion began in the 1970s as more people became interested in their own health and that of their environment. In the 1980s and 1990s production and consumption increased, official standards defining organic produce were formulated, and grant aid for organic farming was introduced in the European Union. Nevertheless, organic farming remains a minority land use. In the UK there were 17.5 million hectares of land on agricultural holdings in 2016, of which only half a million were being farmed organically or converting to organic standards. This reflected a decline from the peak in 2001–2 when there were about 700,000 hectares in organic cultivation, but even that figure only represented about 4 per cent of UK agricultural land. The proportion in the European Union as a whole is a little higher and the trend is different. Over all 28 current member states, according to European Commission statistics, there were 5 million hectares in organic cultivation in 2002, rising to 11.1 million hectares, or 6.2 per cent of the total utilised agricultural area, in 2015. On a world scale, the current annual consumption of organic produce is, according to Barton (p. 195) worth over $80 billion, which is about 3 per cent of the value of world agricultural output.

In short, organic farming is a small but not insignificant part of world agricultural activity. In public attention terms, it punches well above its weight. It is also worth remembering that the figures quoted in the previous paragraph are based on land which is officially recognised as being in organic cultivation. In many countries outside the industrialised world there are no such official schemes, so many farmers will use traditional organic methods without being caught in the official statistics. Conversely, it would be a mistake to assume that all farmers in the global South are using organic methods, because there is evidence that pesticides banned in industrialised countries may still be available there, and there are fewer controls on the use of genetically modified organisms than are found, for example, in Europe. Thus thinking about organic farming introduces many facets of recent interest as far as food, health, environment, and culture are concerned. It has often been observed that history reflects current concerns: the rise of the environmental
movement quickly promoted work on environmental history, and globalisation has produced numerous
global histories. Given the popularity of organic food among the book-buying population, a global history of
organic farming was perhaps to be expected at some point.

Barton begins by discussing the agricultural technology that early advocates of organic farming challenged,
a chapter that includes a rather unconventional discussion of agricultural revolution and the statement that Dr
Gilbert of Rothamsted was an ‘amateur scientist’, which might have raised the eyebrows of his employer,
John Bennet Lawes. Chapter two covers the political, intellectual and historical environment within which
organic farming ideas developed. Then the central chapters of the book, accounting for roughly half of the
text, are concerned with the life, work, and associates of Albert (later Sir Albert) Howard and his two wives,
Gabrielle and her sister Louise, née Matthaei. Much of the new material in them is based on the archives of
the Matthaei family, at present in private hands. Although Barton states that these papers will be deposited at
St John’s College, Cambridge, and available to ‘future generations’, the college itself makes it clear that this
has not yet happened, so that they cannot at present be searched or accessed.

Howard was born in 1873, one of ten children of a substantial tenant farmer in Shropshire. Following a
public school education, he studied at the Royal College of Science in Kensington and then went on to
Cambridge University, where, according to Barton (p. 57) he took a first degree in 1896 and a Diploma in
Agriculture the following year, although Howard’s obituary in Nature (2) states that he graduated with first-
class honours in the Natural Science Tripos in 1898. Following a period teaching and researching in the
West Indies, and three years at the South Eastern Agricultural College at Wye, in Kent, he went, at the end
of 1904, to the Agricultural Research Institute at Pusa in India, between the Himalayas and the Ganges. The
following year, in Bombay Cathedral, he married Gabrielle Matthaei, a Fellow of Newnham College,
Cambridge, who had already published work on plant physiology in the Transactions of the Royal Society.
She called him ‘Bert’. For the next 20 years the Howards worked at Pusa, on a wide range of agricultural
questions but especially on the cultivation and breeding of wheat. Together or separately they produced,
Barton tells us, 93 reports, articles and books.

In 1924 Howard was appointed Director of the Institute of Plant Industry at Indore, on the other side of
India. At Pusa he had realised that the key to healthy and productive crops was a healthy and fertile soil, but
such was the specialisation and division of research work there that studies of the whole crop and its
environment were impossible. At Indore, however, he could plan and carry out the research as he wished. He
had already realised that purchased inorganic fertilisers were far too expensive for most Indian farmers, and
that they had too few animals to provide much manure. He therefore set out to develop a method of
composting any kind of organic material, from crop waste and weeds to fallen leaves and wood shavings,
into a useful fertiliser. By the end of the 1920s he had more or less perfected what he called the Indore
Method. In The Waste Products of Agriculture: their Utilization as Humus, published in 1931, he laid out its
basic principles: essentially, the importance of mixing animal and vegetable residues, and of managing the
material so that the micro-organisms that would break them down could work most effectively.

Barton devotes chapters three and four of his book to telling the story outlined in the previous two
paragraphs. Chapter five is largely devoted to disproving what Barton believes to be one of the more
influential and pervasive myths about Howard: that he based his ideas on the pre-modern wisdom of the
East. He points out here, and in chapter two, that Howard’s ideas had their biggest impact on people who
were only too happy to accept the myth. What he calls the ‘cultural soil’ into which the seeds of organic
farming were sown was made of a mixture of reaction against industrialism and international trade,
agrarianism, health concerns over the declining consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables and the rise of
processed food, and the romantic rural literature of the 1920s. It was not limited to the English-speaking
world. In Germany, Steiner’s ideas about biodynamic farming achieved a considerable following, and Julius
Hensel claimed that Stone Meal, made by grinding up the rocks found in his garden, unlocked inexhaustible
nutritive forces. In this environment, a system that appeared to be based on traditional peasant wisdom
would find ready acceptance. However, in The Waste Products of Agriculture, Barton argues, Howard
‘discussed chemical fertilizers and pesticides without a trace of criticism’ (p. 91). Rather the reverse, in fact:
he suggested that the introduction of ammonium sulphate and cyanamide as nitrogen fertilizers, and copper sulphate as a fungicide, would be worthwhile and represent an improvement on then-current Indian agricultural methods. But at the time he was writing, and engaged on the research upon which *The Waste Products of Agriculture* was based, Howard recognized that the average Indian farmer could not afford such purchased chemical inputs. Hence his concentration upon developing a technique that they could afford, using the materials they had to hand and the resource – labour – most easily available to them. ‘Howard developed the Indore Method out of economic necessity’ (p. 92), and ‘The persistence of the peasant myth has obscured the startling originality of Albert Howard’s work’ (p. 93).

So how did the ‘peasant myth’ originate? Barton identifies three suspects. The first was Howard himself. In his later popular books, *An Agricultural Testament* (1940) and *The Soil and Health* (1947) he spoke of the lessons he had learned from the peasants ‘in a way not found in his earlier scientific publications’ (p. 88). Another was Howard’s second wife, Louise. His first wife, Gabrielle, was herself a considerable scientist, who worked with Howard in India and was a joint author on many of his publications. She died of cancer in 1930. Howard was understandably heartbroken, and retired from India the following year. He then married her sister, Louise, only 13 months after Gabrielle’s death. Louise too had an impressive career before her marriage. She had held a classics fellowship at Newnham College, Cambridge until forced to resign after publishing an anti-war book in 1915. After working for the Hogarth Press, she went to work for the newly-formed International Labour Organisation in 1921, and by 1924 was Chief of its Agricultural Service. After his death she wrote an account of Howard’s work in India which, in Barton’s view, downplays the scientific contribution of his colleagues there, and contains passages which overemphasise the influence of peasant wisdom. And it is these passages which have, according to Barton, been picked up by the third lot of suspects: environmental activists and historians of the organic movement.

I have spent some time on these three chapters, and on chapter five in particular, because they seem to me to be the heart of the book and to contain its new and controversial material. They are clearly heavily dependent upon the Matthaei archive and in particular the letters therein that Gabrielle Howard wrote to her mother. They also rest on what may be a more critical reading of Howard’s (perhaps more accurately the Howards’) earlier publications than most organic enthusiasts and previous historians of the organic movement have attempted. And in my view they produce a coherent and different account of the way in which Howard’s ideas developed at the time when he was perfecting the Indore Method, before 1930. As Barton argues (p. 104),

‘Albert and Louise Howard moved through stages of intellectual development and change, and only came to absorb many of their neo-traditionalist agricultural positions in the late 1930s. It becomes clear that the organic farming movement emerged as the marriage of the Indore Method developed by Albert Howard in India with romantic, ecological and neo-traditional approaches to agriculture’.
The story told in subsequent chapters is better-known. Chapter six deals with Howard’s consultancy work with tea plantations in India in the 1930s and his arguments with Frank Engledow, Draper’s Professor of agriculture at Cambridge and a leading advocate of scientific research-based agricultural change. By the end of the 1930s, despite considerable support from medical scientists such as Robert McCarrison who argued for the link between healthy soil and healthy people, organic farming ideas had failed to convince the majority of British farmers, although they had made more headway with gardeners. After the Second World War they also failed to convince the British government and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, both enthusiastic advocates of increased inorganic fertiliser use. In Barton’s view, Howard’s ‘prophetic and poetic fervour buried all hopes of mainstream scientific and professional acceptance’ (p. 130). Nevertheless, as chapter seven demonstrates, organic ideas survived, thanks to the work of advocates such as Ewald Könemann in Germany, Hans Müller in Switzerland, and Jerome I. Rodale in the USA, who had the misfortune to claim, on the Dick Cavett talk show, that ‘I am so healthy that I expect to live on and on’, before suddenly slumping in his chair. He died a few minutes later.

Chapter eight, entitled ‘The globalization of organic farming’, comprises three sections. The first is on Britain, and apart from brief mentions of important figures such as Lady Eve Balfour and Jorian Jenks is mostly about the life of Fritz Schumacher, who may have been President of the Soil Association for a brief period but otherwise seems a rather peripheral figure. About half of the chapter, in the second section, is on the United States, and the remainder concerns organic farming in Japan. The following chapter, which takes the story from the 1980s to the present day, is also dominated by events in the United States, with little more than a page on the fascinating and well-documented story of the development of organic certification in the European Union, and another page on international organisations. As Barton admits (p. 182), these examples ‘do not capture the whole global story of organic farming’. There is, for example, no mention of one of the most dramatic conversions to widespread organic agriculture, which happened in Cuba following the loss of its sugar market in Eastern Europe and the USSR after 1989.

Although we are proverbially warned against judging a book by its cover, the illustration chosen for this book perhaps tells us something about the way in which the publisher hoped it might attract potential readers. It is taken from a painting by the artist Steven Binks, who has painted a wide range of old farm machinery. In this case it is entitled 60s Harvest and shows a farming family sitting around a red checked table cloth in a harvest field. Their tea is in blue striped mugs and their sandwiches have been brought in a wicker picnic basket. They are framed by a Morris Minor pick-up on the left and a blue Fordson Super Major tractor on the right, ready to pull a trailer loaded with the sacks of grain which have been unloaded from the red Massey Ferguson 780 combine harvester in the background. Like many of Binks’ pictures it takes former farm workers of my age straight back to their youth. But in so doing it might also remind them of spreading inorganic fertiliser on the corn crops of that period, and being covered in red mercuric seed dressing when sowing the seed corn. The association of organic farming with nostalgia for a past rural life needs a careful choice of the period involved.

In summary, the major part of Barton’s book, based on previously unavailable sources, challenges some of the generally accepted ideas about one (but only one) of the formative figures of organic farming. Otherwise, in my view, it adds little to our knowledge of the history of organic farming in the UK that cannot already be found in the works of Philip Conford and of the wider world in the collection of essays edited by William Lockeretz referenced above. There are some small inaccuracies in the footnotes on pp. 36 and 48, but it is good to find a book that still uses footnotes, especially when combined with an extensive bibliography as they are here.

Notes

3. <www.stevenbinks.co.uk/prints/60s_harvest.htm> [accessed 18 September 2018]. Back to (3)

The author has not responded to this review.

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[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298879