

BOOK REVIEW

Of the Land & the Spirit: The Essential Lord Northbourne on Ecology & Religion

Lord Northbourne, edited by Christopher James & Joseph A. Fitzgerald, Foreword by Wendell Berry. World Wisdom Inc., Bloomington IN, USA. <www.worldwisdom.com> September 2008, 272 pages, US\$19.95, ISBN 978-1-933316-61-1

"We have tried to conquer nature by force and by intellect. It now remains for us to try the way of love" (Northbourne, 1940).

Lord Northbourne (1896 - 1982) coined the term "organic farming" and he expounded the case for it in his 1940 manifesto of organic agriculture: *Look to the Land* (Paull, 2006). So a new book by this author is important, is a welcome treat, and warrants the attention of those with an interest in organic food, agriculture and systems.

Of the Land & the Spirit is a collection of essays and chapters that reflect the spectrum of Northbourne's interests, including religion, art, education, gardening and agriculture. Lord Northbourne was trained at Oxford University in agriculture, and it remained one of his abiding interests.

From a lifetime approaching nine decades, **Of the Land & the Spirit** presents an account of four decades of Northbourne's thoughts - beginning with excerpts from *Look to the Land* (1940), through to the final chapter *The Ineluctable Alternative: A Letter to my Descendants* (c.1980). Northbourne's holistic views flow through his writings whether he is discussing farming, flowers or faith: "We were not involved in an unfortunate concurrence of numerous unrelated phenomena, but rather in one single comprehensive phenomenon" (p.219).

One of the best features of this book is the *Introduction*, by Northbourne's only son, Christopher James, (the 5th Lord Northbourne), in which he draws an account of the life of the author, his father Walter James, the 4th Lord Northbourne. He writes of his father as "a man of exceptional and comprehensive vision ... In his writings he draws attention to the dangers we face as we abandon traditional values, and seeks to outline how human society could function more in harmony with nature and with traditional wisdom" (p.xvii).

James recalls "my father's enthusiasm as we visited the compost heaps together" (p.xx). The *Introduction* is an impressionistic account that sometimes clashes with the historical record. James writes that his father had the right to a seat in the UK House of Lords, but "chose not to take his seat" (xvii). Lord Northbourne was entitled to take a seat in the House of Lords and he took that seat on Wednesday 20th June 1934 (House of Lords, 1934).

Of the Land & the Spirit draws on the three books published by Northbourne for 13 of its 21 chapters. *Look to the Land* (1940) contributes four chapters; *Religion in the Modern World* (1963) contributes a further four chapters; and *Looking Back on Progress* (1970) contributes five chapters. The correspondence with Thomas Merton, included as an appendix, has previously appeared in the 2001 reprint of *Religion in the Modern World* and it has a tenuous claim to now re-appear in an "Essential Lord Northbourne".

The remaining eight chapters are stated to be "previously unpublished in book form" (p.v), and are thereby a welcome inclusion within this volume. However, the attribution of dates for only two of these chapters (c.1975, c.1980), and the silence regarding their previous publishing history, if any, is an unfortunate editorial oversight.

Northbourne was a conscientious wordsmith, choosing his words with care, and promoting an awareness on occasion of their etymologies. He insisted that the Biblical proposition that the Kingdom of God is "within you", "must be taken literally and at face value" (p.189). He was a capable translator (from French to English); he observed that: "Nevertheless, no

translator can avoid being himself affected by the outlook of his own times” (p.114). On “new” translations of the Bible he decried “change for its own sake where the original language is neither obscure or archaic” (p.114). So, I can imagine that he might question, as does this reviewer, the adoption of “ecology” in the title of this book; it is a term that Northbourne did not himself employ. Likewise the editors of this collection rebadge various excerpts, e.g. Chapter 5 of *Look to the Land* is anachronised into *Look to the Land: Sustainability*, a title that the author would not himself recognise. Other titles and subheadings throughout are inventions of the editors - but not all.

The four chapter excerpts from *Look to the Land*, unlike the other chapters, are littered with editor-inserted subtitles. Editorial excisions, which are numerous, are indicated variously by ellipses, or editor comments in parentheses. Editorial textual changes are not indicated, they seem arbitrary and to lack consistency, and such un-signalled changes are there from the outset - beginning at the first line of the first chapter.

Northbourne exhibits a generosity and openness of thought and despite a deep Christian commitment, he eschews dogmatism. He succinctly dispels a critique of religions that: “they cannot all be right”. Of such an objection he asserts: “This of course is a shallow view” (p. 208). Practicing what he preached, he translated from the French, the Islamist, René Guénon’s major work, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, as well as the works of other perennialist philosophers.

The quaint and dated Gothic font that the publisher has chosen for the cover of ***Of the Land & the Spirit: The Essential Lord Northbourne on Ecology & Religion*** does a disservice to the presentation of this collection of Northbourne’s writings. The books that Northbourne published in his lifetime were presented as contributions to the intellectual discourse about contemporary societal issues and challenges. There remains today a freshness and currency in Northbourne’s messages, whether he is making the case for organic agriculture, for engagement with spiritual issues, or expressing skepticism that science can provide all the answers that we seek - or is even capable of raising all the questions.

This book is a welcome “taster” for the work and thoughts on Lord Northbourne. It has to recommend it, especially the short account of his life by his son Christopher James, and the eight chapters that make their debut here in book form. ***Of the Land & the Spirit*** can also serve to tempt readers to seek out Northbourne’s previous three books (each of which is currently available as a print-on-demand title), and even perhaps to seek the other books that he translated - on philosophy, art and religion.

John Paull¹

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