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INTRODUCTION

Where there is no vision the people perish.
Proverbs 29:18

Not often does an Olympic sportsman become an organic farmer, educationalist, and monetary reformer, and then go on to become a philosopher who also translated some of the most important metaphysical texts of the modern age.

My father was a man of exceptional and comprehensive vision. He saw that our western society is in danger of destroying itself. 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.

Most of us, at one time or another, ask ourselves the key questions "Who am I?", "Why am I here?" Do the answers to these questions lie within the realm of scientific discovery and logical deduction alone? Must they remain mysteries, comprehended, if at all, through spiritual inspiration, artistic vision, or divine revelation? The search for an answer to these questions led my father, in his fifties, to an understanding which changed his life.

Born in 1896 my father, Walter Edward Christopher James (later 4th Baron Northbourne[1]), was heir to a long line of country landowners distinguished for their public service in Parliament and the arts. His great grandfather was a Member of Parliament and a friend and supporter of Gladstone. His father was trained at the Slade Art School, had a house and studio in London, and became a Trustee of the National Gallery, but was also a keen cricketer and enjoyed

[1] The British peerage, which continues to exist after several centuries, consists of the following grades: duke, marquess (marquis), earl, viscount, and baron. Like all hereditary barons my father was in common usage known and addressed as Lord Northbourne. The word Baron was mainly reserved for legal and more formal documents. Until 1999 all peers had a right to "a seat and a voice" in the House of Lords, the Second Chamber of Parliament (similar to the U.S. Senate). My father chose not to take his seat, preferring to serve his country in Local Government and in other ways.

country life. He described himself in *Who's Who* as "an artist and sportsman, but principally artist".

As a boy my father lived with his family in London but spent most of his holidays with his parents in his grandfather's house in Kent, or in Northumberland where they had an estate on the moors, a paradise for a young boy. Educated at Eton, at the age of 18 he went straight from school into the Northumberland Fusiliers during the opening months of the First World War. He served in Salonika and then, under General Allenby, led Indian Muslim troops in Palestine. He joined a machine-gun regiment and was Mentioned in Despatches. Though spared the worst slaughter and destruction of the Western Front, he was marked for life by the horrors of that war.

In 1919 he went up to Oxford to read agriculture but spent much of his time rowing. He became President of the Oxford University Boat Club (O.U.B.C.), rowed twice in the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race and once for England in the 1921 Olympic Games. Thereafter, he and a rowing friend bought a small farm near Oxford and settled down to learn the craft and the hard work of farming. Harvesting and haymaking were easily handled by inviting a group of Oxford rowing friends, and providing a cask of beer.

When the recession struck they sold out at a loss and he returned home to run the Home Farm on his family estate near Dover in Kent. He was elected a member of the Kent County Council and took on the responsibility of chairing its education committee. This voluntary job fired his interest in education and was the beginning of fifty years of public service to the county of Kent.

In 1924 he married my mother, Katherine Nickerson, daughter of George Nickerson of Boston, Massachusetts, a successful businessman who had played a major role in the development of the Burlington and Ohio Railway as it pushed out to the West in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In 1926 I was born, the oldest, and the only boy of his five children. We lived at Northbourne Court, a house on the family estate which dates back to the sixteenth century and is set among the walls of a ruined Elizabethan garden. It became one my father's greatest loves to plant and to tend this garden for the next fifty years. He made it into one of the most beautiful in England.

His lifelong pastimes were painting and gardening. An amateur botanist as well as an artist, the beauty of flowers fascinated him. His garden at Northbourne Court (and the flowers he cut from it, which

he always arranged in the house himself) was a continuing source of fulfillment and pleasure to him all his life.

It is often recognized that poets and musicians can develop and pass on intimations of the divine which are not accessible to us through rational understanding. Beauty, along with love, can speak to us of truths which cannot be understood or expressed through science or logic alone. Many recognize the same quality in painting or singing, but few realize that designing and planting and tending a garden can also be an intimation of immortality, a modest reflection of Paradise. For my father his garden, and I believe in a lesser way his pictures—mainly of flowers, but also of landscapes and his children—were a reflection of Paradise.

In a letter written in perfect French to the wife of the French Ambassador, Martine de Courcel, who had suggested to him that his garden was like "a corner of paradise", he replied:

> God allows us to do our best to imitate His Paradise, however incompletely, provided that we never forget that all beauty comes from Him alone and remains always in Him, without any loss and for ever.

His painting was an additional source of fulfillment as well as of pleasure and relaxation. Between the wars he painted mainly in oils and pastels. Later, during the Second World War his only relaxation was, every Sunday afternoon, to listen to a concert on the radio and paint a watercolor, usually of flowers. After the war he held several successful exhibitions of his pictures in London.

He was a devoted family man and loved his wife and his five children. When we were young he spent hours playing with us, teaching us to draw, and reading aloud to us. He had a charming and infectious sense of humor. Many of the things he read to us he enjoyed as much as we did—*Three Men in a Boat*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and the writings of Saki were among them. As I got older he would take me with him on long walks around the Estate, teaching me about farming and about the importance of man's relationship with the land.

Although his painting and gardening were important to him throughout his life, between the wars my father's chief interest was organic farming. He ran both his garden at Northbourne Court and the Home Farm according to the biodynamic precepts for organic farming

laid down by Rudolf Steiner (although he never followed Rudolf Steiner in his other ideas). He was one of the very first organic farmers in England and has, indeed, been credited with coining the term "organic farming" to describe a method of farming which avoids the use of all chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and weed-killers.[2] In organic farming fertility is maintained by composting and returning all organic wastes to the soil. I don't know whether the mysterious additions to the compost heaps recommended by Steiner did indeed make them ferment better, but I do remember that the compost they produced was black and juicy and contained a surprising number of earthworms. Amongst my happiest memories as a small boy is my father's enthusiasm as we visited the compost heaps together!

In the early thirties he held a conference on organic farming at Northbourne Court and then during 1938-39 wrote a book, *Look to the Land*,[3] about the importance of wholeness in food and the damage to people and communities caused by "factory farming" and the "mining" of the world's top soils.[4] At that time, twenty-five years before Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* warned the world of the dangers of the unsustainable exploitation of the earth's resources, he foresaw the problems which would be created by man's irresponsible destruction of the world's top soil, the often thin and fragile layer of living surface soil which supports human communities, makes possible the production of the world's food, and sustains the natural environment as we know it.

At this stage of his life he was deeply concerned by the sickness of modern society, especially the increasing breakdown of traditional rural communities. He diagnosed this as stemming from the severance of man from his organic links with the land and with the wholeness of life. He was impressed by the work of Dr. G.T. Wrench, who studied the Hunza tribesmen in northern India, showing them to be an exceptionally healthy people, living in an isolated and traditional rural

[2] See Philip Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2001).

[3] It was published to wide acclaim, with the review by *The New English Weekly* stating that: "The amount of knowledge packed between the covers of this book is formidable; the amount of wisdom inestimable."

[4] *Look to the Land* also contained proposals for a thoroughgoing monetary reform.

society based on self-sufficiency and the twin principles of wholeness (eating as far as possible the whole of the plants they grew), and the rule of return (returning all organic wastes to the soil after careful composting). He nonetheless saw that "man does not live by bread alone" and that the fullness of life and the prosperity which should be integral to its nature demands obedience to a sacred law. This was a vision of life that embraced the inter-relationship of God, man, and the soil in a unity that is in stark contrast to that materialistic, mechanistic way of life instituted by the philosophy of "progress", which has molded our society in the twentieth century.

In September 1939, my father was offered an opportunity to contribute to the war effort as Chairman of the "War Agricultural Committee", which was formed to organize and revitalize the agriculture of East Kent in order to provide food to replace the imported supplies that were being lost in ships sunk by German U-boats in the Atlantic. He rose to this challenge with enthusiasm and worked at it seven days a week almost without a break for the duration of the war years. He did occasionally find time to meet with a small group of like-minded farmers and writers who called themselves "The Kinship in Husbandry", which included such notable figures as Harold Massingham, Adrian Bell, Lord Portsmouth, and Rolf Gardiner. Their objective was to think about and to plan for the future of the countryside and of agriculture after the war.[5] "The Kinship in Husbandry" merged in 1946 with two other entities to found the "Soil Association", an important contemporary organization in the United Kingdom for the promotion and certification of organic food and farming.

With the coming of the peace in 1945 my father continued to run the Home Farm and took on a new responsibility as Provost and Chairman of the Governors of Wye Agricultural College in Kent, which became the Agricultural College of London University. He held this post for 25 years, a period of substantial development for the College.

[5] A selection of their views was published in part in *The Natural Order: Essays in "The Return to Husbandry" by Fourteen Writers*, edited by H. J. Massingham (London: J.M Dent & Sons, 1945). An article by my father is included.

He did not return to the fully organic farming that he had been forced to abandon during the war when, as Chairman of the War Agricultural Committee, he had had to tell others to use fertilizers and sprays in order to increase production. However he never abandoned his understanding of the importance of wholeness, sanity, and sustainability in the way we treat the natural world. Jointly with E.F. Schumacher, the renowned author of *Small is Beautiful*, he held a Conference based at Northbourne Court to explore the possibility of reviving the small self-sufficient family farm in England. He continued to observe with some concern the way in which man was destroying his environment, his quality of life, and even himself, but he began to doubt whether the organic movement was the key to changing this trend. His attention was turned to a more directly spiritual analysis of the state of the modern world. This seemed to him to offer a new and radically different way in which he could help his fellow men and fulfill the purpose of his own life.

The event which changed his life was the discovery of traditional and universal metaphysics in the writings of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. Through his book *Look to the Land*, he had met Marco Pallis, who in turn had introduced him to the "Traditionalist" (or "Perennialist") writers René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, and Martin Lings. He thereafter undertook to translate several books by Guénon, Schuon, and Burckhardt from French into English.

It was this work, and the friendship of those writers, which taught him that the roots of the world's problems are first and foremost spiritual. They confirmed his intuitive understanding of the importance of tradition and enabled him to find a credible answer to those challenging questions that had so far eluded him. They showed him a way of living his life which drew together its diverse strands and gave them meaning. This he was able to do in a context that engaged his intuitive sense of beauty, love and truth, and his understanding of the importance of man's relationship to the land. He had found the "way", which for him fulfilled the needs he sets out so clearly in the chapter in this anthology entitled "Religion and Tradition".

Through the Traditionalist writers he came to understand the reasons for the apparently irreconcilable differences between the teachings of the great revealed religions, and to realize that there is a "perennial philosophy", a "transcendent unity", which runs through them all. Like different routes to the summit of the same mountain,

the starting points may be far apart but the paths get closer and closer as they approach the top. Whichever path is taken, the view from the top is the same; but on the way up the paths must not be confused.

His writings over the last 30 years of his life were driven by his urgent wish to help those capable of doing so to understand the traditional teachings so that they could make more informed decisions about how to live their own lives. In his writings he looks at the traditional point of view in a variety of contexts and contrasts its values with those of our "progressive" society today. He shows that secular materialism—based as it is on scientific observation and on deduction from that observation—can never be authoritative or even useful in understanding matters outside its own domain, which is restricted to the material world. In particular it can never validly address the ultimate cause or meaning of the Universe, nor can it speak with authority on man's role in it.

In the message to his descendants, part of which is included in this anthology, he shows that although organized religion is not the only way to a deeper consciousness of spiritual truth, for most people, to follow one of the great revealed religions provides the safest path, if it is lived faithfully and with understanding.

My father died in 1982 at the age of 86. He always retained his love for his garden and for the beauty of flowers. He continued to work in his garden until a few months before his last illness. I remember that only a few days before his death he insisted on being carried downstairs to supervise one more time the arrangement of the great bunch of flowers that always stood in front of a mirror at the end of the drawing room. This simple act expressed the truth of which he had written: that the "evanescence of flowers is not a matter for regret. It is an ever-present reminder of what we are".

My father was fortunate and happy in the spiritual path which he chose for himself. I hope that this anthology of his writings may help others to find the spiritual way which they are seeking.

> The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:45-46)

Christopher James,
the 5th Lord Northbourne

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by Christopher James

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