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FOREWORD

From the beginning it was always possible to find farmers who were intuitively suspicious of the industrialization of agriculture. Perhaps they objected to the increased authority of suppliers and experts. Perhaps they felt the discord between machinery and living creatures. Perhaps they had a rational fear of toxic chemicals. Perhaps they disliked paying cash for energy and fertility that they had previously received in kind from their farms and their good work. Among at least a few, for whatever reasons, there was a persistent distrust. Had it been otherwise, the growth of criticism and finally of resistance over the last sixty or seventy years could not have happened.

And so Lord Northbourne's *Look to the Land*, written late in the 1930s and published in 1940, is not an anomaly. It came certainly from its author's heritage and character as a countryman. His intuition, his *sense* of what made for good farming and healthy soil, must have told him, as it told others, that something was badly wrong with a view of agriculture that was reductively scientific, materialist, and mechanical. What is remarkable, even astonishing, is that he was capable so early of a criticism that still is sufficiently complex and coherent.

As a critic of agriculture, Lord Northbourne's qualifications went far beyond what we think of as intelligence and education. He was intelligent and educated, of course, but he was also experienced, observant, and passionately affectionate toward the land and the farmers. It is affection, I think, that sets him apart from the "objective" proponents of industrialization who, if they have affection, cannot admit it. And it is affection that undoubtedly gives to his criticism its indispensable breadth.

The criteria of industrial agriculture have been strictly limited to productivity, mechanical efficiency, and profitability (to the industrial suppliers of technology, fuel, and credit). Anyone experienced in good farming will recognize intuitively that those three measures, in isolation, can lead only to the impoverishment of everything involved (except, temporarily, the industrial suppliers). By contrast, Lord Northbourne rejected the simplifications by which productivity, for instance, could be divided from fertility and fertility from the life cycle and the life cycle from health. His purpose, as he understood,

had to be wholeness. Agriculture partakes of the wholeness of life, which it inescapably must either preserve or destroy. In confronting industrial agriculture, he saw that he was confronting a "sickness" that was at once spiritual, economic, and biological.

Agriculture, as he saw it, is an order of perhaps infinite complexity, involving perhaps everything, from the microorganisms of the soil to the human cultures that can be founded only upon the soil. It involves the interdependence of all living creatures and of all living creatures with the non-living. And so it can be evaluated only by a complex set of standards that are separable only as a convenience of thought. The standards necessarily are *both* qualitative and quantitative, biologic, economic (in the usual sense of provisioning, but also in the senses of frugality and caretaking), social, cultural, and aesthetic. Farming involves intelligence, wisdom, devotion, love, compassion, freedom, wildness, harmony, health. It raises urgently questions about economic justice, propriety of scale, harmony between nature and human economy or wildness and cultivation. And all these concerns and considerations, to the limited extent that they can be thought about, can be resolved only in the art of farming a particular farm.

Lord Northbourne's writing on agriculture can thus be seen as an early, and an immensely capable, reaction against scientific reductionism and the partitioned structure of modern intellectual life. To say this is to give the reason for his continuing usefulness. As a critic of agriculture, he aimed at wholeness of vision, and nobody has come closer to achieving it.

From the complexity of his agricultural standards, and his perception that the problems of industrial agriculture have a "spiritual aspect", it is not surprising that much of Lord Northbourne's thought and writing was devoted to religion. Religion is a far more difficult subject than agriculture, and yet it is a subject that cannot be ignored, simply because it is not ignorable. Those who take agriculture seriously enough and study it long enough will come to issues that will have to be recognized as religious.

They must start, where Lord Northbourne starts, with the contempt for the material creation that, in our utter estrangement from reality, we call "materialism". Farmers, as some might say, are the

primary materialists, for they are preoccupied with the insistent materiality of the world. But this very insistence drives them beyond materialism into the presence of mysteries and wonders. They do not control the weather or the seasons. They deal directly with powers, cycles, and lives that they did not make and do not entirely know. They know firsthand that "except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit". They are well-positioned to doubt that the quality of human life can be rendered in a materialist or a merely quantitative accounting. As Jesus evidently knew, the connection of farming to religion is direct.

Lord Northbourne deals with this connection in Chapter 5, "Agriculture and Human Destiny",[1] published in 1970. This, to my mind, is one of the two paramount essays gathered here, both because of the importance of the subject and because of the intelligence with which it is treated. We need only to notice that, in the four decades since this chapter was written, the human economy—by means of toxic chemicals, nuclear technology, earth-moving machinery, and explosives—has grown fearfully as a geographic and even a geologic force; that the phenomenon of "peak oil" has placed us in a crisis of unprecedented extent and gravity; and that, therefore, the survival of proper methods and standards of land use has greatly increased in urgency.

"Agriculture", Lord Northbourne writes, "is the foundation of human life". This, though still and forever undeniable, may seem shockingly radical in a time when many experts believe agriculture has been superseded by manufacturing or "service" or "information". But agriculture is not just an economy. It is also (especially if we include forestry) the principal way we humans determine our place in nature, and therefore the principal way we practice, directly or by proxy, our religion, or our lack thereof. Now, as Lord Northbourne clearly saw, we are working out and suffering the implications of our divorce from Nature. But that divorce, so nearly perfect as it now is, is fairly recent:

> Formerly, man lived more or less in harmony with Nature, and played his part in maintaining what we call "a balance of Nature".

[1] Originally titled "A Glance at Agriculture". —Editors

> That natural balance, if we could but see it so, represents a fulfillment of the divine ordinances whereby all living things are related one to another through their common origin in God. . . .

Because we are at once natural creatures and created in God's image, we necessarily mediate "between God and Nature". This is a tough spot to be in, as the great teachers of religion have told us, and as we are proving for ourselves. It is a tough spot because, in it, we cannot be "neutral" and we cannot escape. We have great power, for which the biblical term is "dominion", and we cannot use it except well or poorly. If we use it poorly, which is to say selfishly, our dominion itself is turned against us—as we are seeing in the reductions, distortions, and injustices of industrial agriculture and its subserving sciences.

If an out-of-control agri-industrialism has thrown us profoundly out of harmony with Nature and therefore with God, then it seems that good farming would be just as validly and as fully a practice of religion as any other vocation or kind of work. But here we encounter what may be the greatest fault of our civilization. And here I appear to be at odds with Lord Northbourne, who insists on the compatibility of "orthodoxy" and the "true charity" of traditional religion with "traditional laws" that "serve to maintain the social hierarchy". Jesus undoubtedly was not a "social reformer" in our sense of that term, and yet his teachings grant a decided precedence to fishermen, shepherds, plowmen, sowers of seed, servants, and "the least of these my brethren". My immediate point is that we have inherited an idea of social hierarchy that depreciates bodily work as menial or servile or low, and that this depreciation has been disastrous for (among other arts) agriculture.

We obviously must deal, as Lord Northbourne does, with the example of Mary who, in Luke 10:38-42, chose the "one thing [that] is needful". And I can deal with this passage only by confessing that I don't understand it. Though here, as elsewhere in the Gospels, I willingly accept my failure of insight and my need for patience, maybe I can usefully explain my bewilderment. Mary's sister, Martha, complained that Mary wasn't helping her. Jesus evidently having come to dinner without forewarning, Martha had a lot of housework on her hands. She "was cumbered about much serving", like the Good Samaritan and others whom Jesus praises, and like every good farmer.

If her work "was blameless and even necessary", as Lord Northbourne admits it was, I can't see why Jesus doesn't classify it as "needful". Nor can I see why Mary and Martha must be thought to represent mutually exclusive alternatives. Why, on the *next* day, couldn't Martha have sat at Jesus' feet while Mary did the housework? If we take this passage alone as indicating a divinely recommended hierarchy of occupations, then it seems to me that we come by mere logic to the modern structure of "mind over matter", in which good farmers are thought to be performing "mind-numbing", merely necessary work, while philosopher-kings sit clean-handed in universities performing the elitist and reductionist work of genetic modification—which I think is not what Lord Northbourne had in mind.

It may be objected that the most important human occupation is prayer, and that (as Lord Northbourne is careful to remind us) Jesus said for us to "take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? . . . But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." But Jesus says this, nevertheless, in the material and practical circumstances of our earthly life, which are unforebearing and absolute and which he seems to take for granted. His instruction to seek first the kingdom of God does not imply that if we adopt that priority we will be nourished and clothed automatically or miraculously. Those benefits, though they are owed ultimately to God, will not come to us if we have not mastered and if we do not practice the arts of agriculture, viticulture, animal husbandry, cooking, food-preserving, sheep-shearing, spinning, weaving, and sewing. Might not these practices, properly performed, be ways of seeking the kingdom of God, as work (good work, I assume) *has* been said to be a way of prayer? At any rate, Jesus did not advise the hungry to pray for food or the sick to pray for health. He fed them, and he healed them.

When we get to questions of practice, it appears to me that the things of time and the things of eternity are not readily separable, and that sometimes they may be the same things.

In his later writings Lord Northbourne aligns himself with a company of writers known as Traditionalists or Perennialists. The writers so

designated, who were his associates and influences, are listed in the Introduction to this book: René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Marco Pallis, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, and Martin Lings. I have read the four last-named at length and have been strongly affected and influenced by them. And so I find in Lord Northbourne's writings on art much to sympathize or agree with. But in reading him, as in reading other Traditionalists, I am sometimes bewildered. Here again it may be useful if, without disagreeing necessarily, I attempt to explain my bewilderment.

In Chapter 15, "Art Ancient and Modern", one never knows exactly what is meant by the adjectives "ancient" and "modern". Most people, I suppose, know vaguely what is meant by "ancient", but when does "ancient" leave off and "modern" begin? And what are we to make of twentieth century writers such as T. S. Eliot or David Jones or James Joyce who have ancient preoccupations but are modern in manner? If you are saying that "ancient art" is categorically better than "modern art", you have to get down to cases. You have to talk about specific artists and specific works of art. It is necessary "to compare things that possess a quality with things that do not", as Lord Northbourne himself suggests in Chapter 5. This is our only way of making qualitative sense either of art or of agriculture.

That this is true is demonstrated immediately in Chapter 16, "The Beauty of Flowers", which in my opinion is the second of this book's paramount essays. Maybe it is not possible to make a *winning* argument about beauty, but the argument here is precisely detailed and therefore persuasive. It has the authority and exuberance of exact knowledge and of long and ardent thought. It is a splendid essay, a masterwork, and it is exemplary.

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