



Organic Origins - the ideas shaping the Soil Association 60 years ago

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Philip Conford looks at the ideas shaping the Soil Association 60 years ago

The founding of the Soil Association occurred a year before the Agriculture Act of 1947, and the proximity of these events is not coincidental. Both were responses to drastic wartime changes in farming. The Second World War saw a government-driven move to mechanisation, with pressure put on all farmers to adopt the use of chemical fertilisers, which led in due course to the decline of smaller, mixed farms.

The Soil Association's birth should also be viewed in the context of the 1942 Beveridge Report and the post-war establishment of the National Health Service. The state of the British people's health had been the subject of widespread concern during the 1930s and its improvement became a matter of survival during the war. By advocating that agriculture should be the basis of a preventive health service and by opposing chemical farming, the Soil Association's inspirers and founders countered the prevailing orthodoxy and contributed to two of the major social debates of the 1940s.

It is sometimes said that their views were ignored. True, in their day they had minimal influence on agricultural and health policy, but they were heard and respected. The Soil Association arose largely as a result of their critique of industrial farming

Picton is the least known of the three authors, but it was he who linked Howard's work on crop breeding and Sir Robert McCarrison's studies in nutrition. He brought the two men together in 1939 for the launch of the Medical Testament (see Living Earth 202), a document urging investigation of the relationship between compost-grown food and human health. The British Medical Journal devoted a special supplement to the Medical Testament and correspondence about its ideas continued for several months.

The work of Howard, Picton and McCarrison encouraged Eve Balfour to expand the Medical Testament's ideas in *The Living Soil*. By the time her book appeared, Howard's views were arousing much debate in the farming press. A "great humus controversy" was raging, with fertiliser manufacturers weighing in to defend their products. The House of Lords debated the issues and several peers pressed the case for organic methods.

The *Living Soil* was typical of many books of the time in its concern for building a secure

post-war future. Writing for the Evening Standard in September 1945, Howard encouraged the new Prime Minister Clement Attlee to “clutch the flying skirts of happy chance” and win the peace by establishing a farming policy which would make agriculture a primary means of preventive medicine. In *Farming and Gardening for Health or Disease*, published the same year, Howard reviewed the success of his methods, and in 1946 Lionel Picton summed up half a century of medical experience in *Thoughts on Feeding*, a book which demonstrates extensive historical and practical knowledge of dietary issues.

Howard died in 1947, the year of the Agriculture Act, and Picton in 1948, the year the NHS was established: one might see a certain neatness in this. Eve Balfour, on the other hand, lived long enough to see the full development of an agriculture, a food industry and a medical system all highly dependent on chemicals.

One can only speculate as to what Howard, Picton and Balfour would have made of our current celebrity-laden organic movement. Their books come from an era before the sound-bite, and may at first sight appear specialist. But the Organic Classics have much to offer the contemporary reader: they were manifestos for a new approach to tackling social ills and their concern with environmental protection, methods of food production and human health remains as relevant as ever.

May their combination of knowledge and passion inspire a new generation of readers.

How can I support the work of the Soil Association?

The Soil Association is a membership charity, we urgently need your support to continue our work. As public support for the Soil Association continues to grow, our ability to influence the thinking and policies of government and big business grows with it. In this way we help to develop a truly healthy and sustainable future. Join us today and help us to continue campaigning for sustainable agriculture and organic food. You can join the Soil Association on our website, over the phone or by writing to us.

[Further Reading](#)

Please see the Soil Association website library, <http://www.soilassociation.org/library>, for more information

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