Deep Roots in the Land

by SHIRLEY-ANNE HARDY

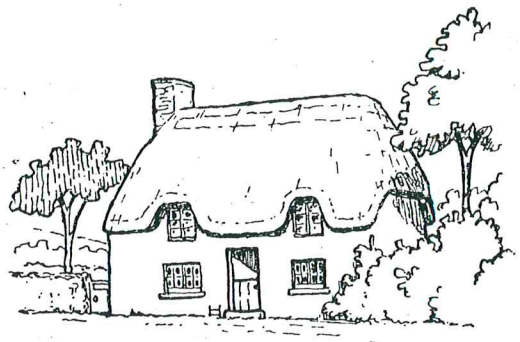
HOW MANY people realise the full extent of the evil resulting from man's alienation from the land? *Human Ecology** is a challenge even to those who think they do realise it. For here, the pioneer of grassland researches, who proves to be one of the most discerning thinkers of our times, sets out to show how our civilisation, in cutting off its age-long association with the earth, is hastening its own destruction.

"My primary interest," says Stapledon, "is the proper use of land surface in relation to human life, and the influence of association with nature-in-the-raw on human behaviour and character."

The author describes man's urge to enjoy the countryside and wide open spaces as "one of our most compelling and one of our most character-forming urges." The value he sets upon man's ability to respond to nature is revealed in the following passage: "Amongst the most pathetic lessons of the war was the revelation of the extent to which large numbers of adults evacuated from the cities had completely lost any feeling for the country and nature; in this they had sunk below the fully human."

But this separation from the land is but the beginning of our ills. For its effect works like leaven through the different spheres of our life, perpetuating its lost sense of values, repeating its sub-human ideal. From it have arisen those other separations our lives have come to know, of whose pain we are perhaps more conscious.

Thus in education we have the separation to a large extent of the training of the powers of the intellect from those of feeling, observation and skill, to the impoverishment of all and to the detriment, if not the actual harm, of the individual. In work, where the advent of the machine has meant nowadays "far too many workmen who are not called upon to make decisions," we find a large section of the population using only those gifts that belong to hand and eye. But for the craftsman, head, heart, hand and eye *all* participated in the work. Herein lies the essence of the tragedy for the individual of the end of craftsmanship. Moreover, the specialisation called for by the machine, where each worker deals with only a fractional part of one product, means that he has little chance of seeing the product whole, either literally or in his imagination. For these reasons the working lives of vast numbers of the population have now become lives of sheer drudgery.



In addition, family life suffers the evils of separation — in this case, the separation of the world of work from the world of home. How many children today have the opportunity of seeing their fathers at work? Even if they did, it would not be as in the days when, helping him in field or workshop at home, children could find education for life as well as work — besides getting to know their father in the best possible way — by watching him take the hundreds of little decisions that those real tasks involved.

We are, in Stapledon's view, going backwards instead of forwards, through having allowed a wrong sense of values to take charge of our development, and all the technological advances of our age cannot compensate us for this. On the contrary, our losses are all round. Even in the field of our national literature, Stapledon remarks, there is much that children born in the towns today cannot enter into or enjoy, because so many of them have lost the feeling for nature. There is, indeed, practically no sphere of our life in which we are advancing today that Stapledon does not challenge as demonstrating the opposite of progress.

How is it that this ostensible progress brings with it such poverties? An understanding of the effects of our alienation from the land in other spheres of life besides the economic strengthens our conviction of the need for land reform. We cannot afford to be less than comprehensive in our view. Such questions as battery farming, the growing use of chemicals in our food, the proposal to fluoridate water supplies, are all part of the same questions involving human rights and natural living.

Where people are not willing to look at the dangers involved in taking drugs — (for drugs have a way of violating nature) — it is often possible to start them thinking when they are suffering from side-effects. So interest in the total effects of land use might encourage people to question the economic aspects and our system of land tenure. It is from this in the first place that spring the maladjustments in society that in time give rise to the misuse of natural resources that are the inheritance and trust of us all.

If we are looking for evidence, what of that provided by the side-effects of our housing policies today? For it is patent that plans to house people in little boxes one on top of another err, not only because this speaks to

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* *Human Ecology* by George Stapledon. (Faber & Faber, 30s.)

As ye sow . . .

SIMPLE work in a primitive society is immediately meaningful. It is because people live near their work and see why it is necessary and how it is rewarded, and the people they work with are also their neighbours. Now they go some distance, to work alongside people they don't know, in a community whose way of working has nothing to do with living.

We have evolved a way of work which is quite unnatural and which brings sourness and stress and disturbance into our lives. Instead of finding fulfilment in their work, people find threat and disgruntlement which they carry into their homes. The result is a disordered, diseased community.

— Mr. Philip Gardner, Lecturer in Psychology, University of Glasgow.

us of an unfair appropriation of the land, but because to make people live — worse, little children grow up — without contact with nature, even in the way of a small piece of land where they can plant with their own hands and care for an animal, is to invite disaster. Communal playing-grounds, however imaginatively designed, cannot substitute for this, for they serve a different need; besides which they are not a *family* enjoyment.

If George Stapledon is right, and the desire for contact with nature is "one of our most compelling and one of our most character-forming urges," a frustration of this desire must be expected to have serious consequences. Should we not, then, be looking as deep as this for the beginnings of those causes that underlie problems such as juvenile crime, hooliganism and declining moral standards? And if the beginning is to be found here, are not their crimes really *ours,* because we have permitted children to grow up deprived of a basic and necessary "food?" I believe that they are; and would say that in a sense the growth of crime among young people today is simple retribution for this.

Not the least remarkable feature of Stapledon's book is the frequency with which the word "lethal" occurs. It is a word which has, unfortunately, grown familiar to us alongside "ecology", and for this reason it is impossible not to be remined, in reading this book, of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* where the word "lethal" appears also in an ecological context. Considering the wide public interest aroused at the appearance of *Silent Spring,* why, one asks oneself, did Stapledon's book make almost no impact on its publication?

The reason seems to me twofold. First, that it deals with dangers somewhat less tangible, because less material, than those of which Rachel Carson writes, and secondly, that the ways against which it warns us are ways to which we are even more deeply committed than we are to our insecticides and pesticides, for they involve *political ideals and loyalties.* It is therefore that much more difficult to acknowledge that the views Stapledon expresses may be right — or even perhaps to take them seriously.

Considering the opposition which Stapledon's ideas met during his lifetime, one of the most remarkable things about this book is its optimism. Whence does it spring? Stapledon himself tells us in these words in his last chapter, "Postscript to a Dream."

"The grounds for optimism . . . do not spring from the actions that statesmen are willing to take at present, but in the stronger desires of the masses of people of the world to improve their lot. No matter whether the cry is for greater political freedom, higher standards of material comfort, greater security, or better education, in all cases the cry is the echo of a terrific urge to attain to something better . . . men realise, even if half despairingly, that harmony is attainable and the urge to achieve it runs high in the breasts of millions of individuals."

Such a man as George Stapledon is of the stature and lineage of the prophets. Fittingly, Robert Waller's biography of him is entitled *Prophet of the New Age.*