

The Emergence of the Biodynamic Movement in New Zealand: 1930-1960s

Dr Garth John Turbott

Auckland, New Zealand
john.turbott@gmail.com

Abstract

The practice of biodynamic agriculture dates from 1930 in New Zealand. The contribution of some of New Zealand's biodynamics pioneers are related in this paper, including Bernard Crompton-Smith, George Winkfield, James Coe, and George Bacchus. New Zealand's biodynamics pioneers relied on copies of Rudolf Steiner's *Agriculture Course* received from Europe and on extensive correspondence with like minded individuals including Ehrenfried Pfeiffer and Guenther Wachsmuth of the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum, at Dornach, Switzerland. The use of the biodynamic preparations dates in New Zealand from 1931. George Bacchus travelled to Germany and Britain (1934-1935) to gain practical experience of biodynamics and carried his knowledge back to New Zealand. Bacchus travelled again to Britain (1937-1947) before once again returning to New Zealand. The Rudolf Steiner Biological Dynamic Association for Soil and Crop Improvement was founded in New Zealand 1939. The name was soon changed to the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand, and then in 1950 to the Bio Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association in New Zealand. A biodynamics conference at Te Aroha in May 1945 was attended by 80 members of the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand. The Association at that time had around 200 members. Post war, the membership of the Association fell to 50 or 60 members in the 1950s. Fresh interest was generated and new members joined in the 1960s. The adoption of the European biodynamics 'Demeter' trademark to differentiate biodynamic produce in the marketplace was proposed in 1964 and this proposal was finally implemented in 1984 in New Zealand. The biodynamics project continues and the association is incorporated as the 'Bio Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association in NZ'.

Keywords: Biodynamic farming, organic agriculture, Rudolf Steiner, The Agriculture Course, Bio-Dynamic Association, Auckland, Havelock North, Demeter.

Introduction

A number of dedicated individuals followed the teachings of the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), in New Zealand from the early 1900s (Turbott, 2013). The Anthroposophical Society in New Zealand was established in 1930. Like the parent body in Dornach, its purpose was primarily to further the pursuit of the spiritual pathway which Steiner had indicated. The core activities of its members were study, thought and meditation. However, they also firmly believed in the application of Steiner's insights to the material world. As these practical pursuits became more focused, groups with specialised interests and purposes emerged within the broad anthroposophical stream. Historically these were known as the 'daughter movements', although this term is used

less by contemporary Anthroposophists, some of whom would prefer to view the various areas and activities simply as different manifestations of the one broad anthroposophical enterprise (Noble, 2009).

The 'daughter movements' of Anthroposophy emerging in New Zealand were Steiner childhood education, the application of biodynamics in gardening and farming, and the somewhat later development of anthroposophical pharmacy and medicine (Turbott, 2013). This paper describes the history of the biodynamic movement in New Zealand from 1930 to the 1960s.

Biodynamics

Dr Rudolf Steiner spent his childhood and early adolescence in rural communities where he was a close observer of nature and the farming activities around him. Both his perception of nature and his concern with the effects of human intervention on the natural environment were strongly influenced by his later reading of Goethe whose scientific work he studied as a young man for his contribution to the *Deutsche National-Literatur* (German National Literature) series in 1883 (Childs, 1995).

Steiner found Goethe's insistence on a spiritual perspective in the description of natural phenomena an affirmation of his own intuitive beliefs, and a welcome vindication of his rejection of the pervasive materialism of the scientific philosophy of his time. Steiner embraced Goethe's understanding of the subjective, symbolic and cosmic properties of light, and his belief that living organisms developed under the influence of cosmic and spiritual forces from a basic form which could be intuited by the sensitive observer. These ideas were to become central in Steiner's anthroposophical writings. They underpinned the practical advice on agriculture he was to deliver, advice that came to full fruition in the famous agriculture course of eight lectures which Steiner gave in Koberwitz in June 1924 (Paull, 2011a; Steiner, 2004).

Rudolf Steiner's *Agriculture Course* was given in response to requests from a number of farmers, animal breeders and gardeners who were concerned by their observation of a decline in the vigour of their breeding stock and the fertility of their lands. Steiner considered that these problems were the consequence of a deviation from natural processes in modern agriculture, brought about by contemporary scientific farming practices, including the uptake of synthetic fertilisers, which ignored the interdependence of living organisms and their environment, particularly the soil, and the spiritual influences necessary for development and growth.

Rudolf Steiner's response was to give a series of suggestions and indications for the maintenance of soil health, involving changing methods of cultivation, the use of compost and special preparations, crop and livestock rotation, and the treatment of each farm as a unique, self-dependent functional unit. These lectures gave birth to the biodynamic method, which incorporated both biological and dynamic (spiritual) approaches to agriculture. Steiner himself did not use the term 'biodynamic', the terminology evolved later with his followers (Paull, 2011b; Pfeiffer, 1938).

Biodynamics in New Zealand

Bernard Crompton-Smith (1870-1958) was an Auckland lawyer married to the younger daughter of Emma Jane Richmond, one of New Zealand's earliest Anthroposophists. He

established his orchard in Havelock North around 1913 and certainly was conducting his life by anthroposophical principles at that time. There are anecdotes suggesting that he was the earliest in New Zealand to adopt Steiner's suggestions for the use of special preparations on the soil (R. Bacchus, 2011). Crompton-Smith was the first New Zealander to apply for a copy of Rudolf Steiner's *The Agriculture Course*. He applied to the Anthroposophical Society in Dornach Switzerland in February 1930. He received his early typescript version of the English translation of *The Agriculture Course*, inscribed with his name as the recipient, and numbered 'E12' (all copies issued were numbered; Crompton-Smith's copy was the twelfth issued copy of the English translation). Between 1930 and 1938 fifteen New Zealand anthroposophists applied for and received numbered copies of *The Agriculture Course* (Paull, 2018).

In 1931 another of New Zealand's pioneer Anthroposophists, George Winkfield (1873-1957), began the production of biodynamic preparations for use in composting, gardening and farming in Auckland, and this marks the first systematic use of Steiner's agricultural methods in New Zealand (Whelan, 1994). George Boland Winkfield was born in Manchester, the son of a successful marine artist, and was educated in London. He demonstrated his academic prowess by finishing secondary school at the age of thirteen and was apprenticed as an engineer with Siemens Brothers before completing a degree in electrical engineering at London University. He joined the Cable Service in England in 1900 and transferred to the Pacific Cable Board in 1905 as a cable officer on HMCS Iris, later to be famous as the ship which recaptured Count von Luckner after his escape from Motuihe Island during World War I.

George Winkfield became a Theosophist and a friend of Daniel Nicol Dunlop (1868-1935) (Lang, 2001; Whelan, 1994). Dunlop had been involved, with W. B. Yeats, in the Irish Theosophical Society, and was to become a prominent Anthroposophist, active in the British electrical industry and in the establishment of the World Power Conference in 1924 (Meyer, 1992). Winkfield followed Dunlop into Anthroposophy in 1926 and, as a cable officer with only intermittent duties while at sea, he had ample time to study the works of Rudolf Steiner (Whelan, 1994).

George Winkfield, then based in Auckland as a cable consultant at the Central Post Office, went to the Goetheanum with his wife and 10-year-old daughter Joyce (now Joyce Whelan) in 1930, accompanied by another early Auckland Anthroposophist, the businessman James Coe and his first wife. Winkfield met with many prominent Anthroposophists during the course of this trip and received instruction on making biodynamic preparations. After attending the first conference of the Biodynamic Association in Great Britain at Bray on Thames, he returned to Auckland in 1931. He replanted his extensive garden in Clonbern Road with the necessary herbs and plants, and began making biodynamic preparations on a large scale. From his retirement as a cable consultant in 1933, he devoted his time to Anthroposophy and to the biodynamic movement (A.R.T, 1958; Whelan, 2010).

George Winkfield maintained an extensive correspondence with Anthroposophists throughout the world, including with the leading figures Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer and Dr Guenther Wachsmuth, who were both based at the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland. Winkfield had an extensive library which he made freely available to all interested parties. He became widely known as a supplier of biodynamic preparations, and an authority and consultant on biodynamics.

Amongst those who consulted with Winkfield were the New Zealand surveyor and entrepreneur Charles Alma Baker (1857-1941), who sought advice about soil preparation and composting on his rubber estates in Malaya and farming enterprise at 'Limestone Downs', south of Port Waikato, and Ben Roberts, Minister of Agriculture, 1943-1946, in the wartime Nash government, who was looking for alternatives to phosphate fertilisers which were in short supply at that time (Macdonald, 1993; Roberts, 1965). Alma Baker was active in promulgating his own ideas, some of which derived from Steiner's work, about maintenance of the soil, the drawbacks of artificial fertilisers, and the benefits of compost. His booklet *Peace with the Soil* (Baker, 1939) was distributed to all members of the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand in 1940, and a subsequent book, *The Labouring Earth* (Baker, 1940), was described by a 1941 *News Letter* reviewer as "a rational plea for the urgent application of organic thinking in the realm of agriculture" (BDANZ, 1941).

Ben Roberts was a convert to composting, and an interested visitor to the Winkfield garden in Clonbern Road, assisting with the supply of the animal products used for some biodynamic preparations (Whelan, 2010). Winkfield was assisted by the Papatoetoe orchardist Marsden Dunningham, who devised a series of totara-staved tanks with mechanical stirrers for making the preparations and he offered them for sale (BDANZ, 1946a).

George Winkfield was amongst the founders of the Rudolf Steiner Biological Dynamic Association for Soil and Crop Improvement in 1939 (the name was soon changed to the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand, and in 1950 to the Bio Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association in New Zealand). At the first AGM, held in the Auckland Domain restaurant, he was elected president of the council (Whelan, 2010). Other members were James Coe and the broadcaster L. Courtenay Hall, all from the Auckland region. The *News Letter* of the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand of January 1940 reported a membership of fifty. Courtenay Hall represented the Association with an address on agriculture to the Dominion Reconstruction Conference in Auckland in November 1941 (AS, 1941).

Another group, with similar aims and a number of shared members, was launched two years after the Bio-Dynamic Association in Auckland in 1941 by the dentist Guy Chapman, who was concerned with the prevalence of dental decay which he attributed to poor nutrition. He founded the Humic Compost Club (now the Soil & Health Association of New Zealand and publisher of the influential journal *Organic NZ*). This attracted the attention of the MP Ben Roberts, who was a vice-patron of the club, and in 1943 became Minister of Agriculture (Organic NZ, 2012; Roberts, 1965).

During 1944, Courtenay Hall, who had been running a small orchard in Keri Keri since 1939 using biodynamic methods, launched an appeal through the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand to fund the purchase of a larger property and to establish a biodynamic research and testing station there, with the hope of later starting an agricultural school (Hall, 1944). He was a trustee of the fund, along with George Winkfield and Captain F.H. Billington. The latter was also an active member of New Zealand's Humic Compost Club.

The Rudolf Steiner Biological Dynamic Association for Soil and Crop Improvement, now renamed The Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand, met in May 1945 for a major

conference in Te Aroha, organised by local members, many of whom were share milkers. They were headed by the secretary, Mr D. Brimblecombe, of the Cooperative Dairy Company and treasurer Mr N. Gibbs (BDANZ, 1946a; NZNS, 1945). This meeting was attended by around 80 people, including George Winkfield and the prominent Auckland members Marsden Dunningham and Captain Billingham. The Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand had around 200 members at that time, a number already in excess of the Anthroposophical Society in New Zealand which then had about 120 members, although a significant number belonged to both.

The Te Aroha biodynamics conference comprised five days of discussions, farm visits and demonstrations of biodynamic methods, and an opening address by the Minister of Agriculture, Ben Roberts, who asked his audience:

I wonder would you be interested to know why I have such faith in this bio-dynamic philosophy? Of course, as Minister of Agriculture I am directly interested in permanent fertility of the soil, and in a system of agriculture which will promote healthy livestock and diminish disease, but the bio-dynamic connection with agriculture appeals to me because Dr Steiner revealed to us the spiritual approach to farming and agriculture ... It has been said, 'That the moral code of a nation may be judged by its treatment of its women and children', but I would also say, 'That the moral code of a nation may be judged by its treatment of its soil'. The soil is man's heritage. It is what men live for, and what men die for – the mother of us all ... To exploit the land is to rob generations unborn. We have some mighty problems today, but it is questionable whether the crowning infamy isn't the 'Rape of the Earth' (Roberts, 1965, p. 158).

A decision was made to seek incorporation of the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand, with George Winkfield continuing as its first President and Ben Roberts as Vice President. There was further discussion of the proposal for the purchase of a property in Keri Keri. This had run into controversy, because of a perception by some that Courtenay Hall's methods were too high-handed, and the appeal had failed to raise sufficient money. Hall subsequently resigned from the Association and took no further part in its proceedings (BDANZ, 1946b).

George Winkfield was deeply upset by the Keri Keri affair and wrote a brief article of explanation in the Newsletter of the Bio-Dynamic Association in New Zealand, crediting Courtenay Hall's lecture tours and other activities over the years of WWII with greatly increasing public interest in biodynamics (Winkfield, 1947). With the abandonment of the Keri Keri project, it was decided that the Association would instead give financial support to the establishment of an experimental glasshouse, with equipment for scientific testing, on the property of Raynor Jones at Wainuiomata (NZNS, 1948).

Another notable New Zealand pioneer of biodynamic methods was George Bacchus (1902-1966). Bacchus grew up on his parents' farm at Otaki, attended Wanganui Collegiate School and Canterbury University, and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering. During the 1920s he worked on the Parnassus-Blenheim railway and the early Waitaki hydroelectricity projects. He developed his interest in Anthroposophy independently over this time, showing a particular bent towards meditative practice, and receiving study materials from "the ladies" in Havelock North, Ruth Nelson and Edna Burbury (Atkinson, 1967). It is said that he safely received correspondence from them, directed simply to "Bacchus, Parnassus", a testimony to the persistence of the mail

sorters of the 1920s and perhaps also to their knowledge of the classics (R.Bacchus, 2001).

Influenced by the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and concerns about the unrestrained effects of commercial development on the natural environment which he saw in his work, George Bacchus came to the decision to abandon his career as an engineer and to devote his life to Anthroposophy, and the study of Steiner's approach to agriculture. In 1934, having learned some German, he went to Europe to visit the Goetheanum and to work as a labourer and student on biodynamic farms and gardens in Germany and England. He returned to New Zealand in 1935 and contributed a summary of his findings to the *New Zealand News Sheet* in 1936, with an article demonstrating the mixture of spiritual philosophy and practical advice, based on field trials and experiment, which is characteristic of the biodynamic movement (G. Bacchus, 1936). In order to gain local experience, he worked on various farms in New Zealand, where owners were interested in applying biodynamic methods.

One of these farms was the Jackson farm 'Durslade', near Woodville, to which George Bacchus came in 1936 on the initiative of Mrs Dorothy Jackson. On this 400-acre property with a large vegetable garden and orchard, Bacchus demonstrated the use of biodynamic preparations and composting methods (Jackson, 1994). Here also he met Nancy Crompton-Smith, who was working as a nanny for the Jackson children (R. Bacchus, 2011). She was the daughter of Bernard-Crompton Smith's younger brother Sydney, and had become an Anthroposophist along with her uncle and father. George and Nancy were married in 1936, and in 1937 returned to the United Kingdom.

George Bacchus was an adviser to the British Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association and, during the years of World War II, an itinerant worker on a variety of biodynamic farms throughout Britain. The family came back to New Zealand with four children in 1947, settling on a dairy farm at Wharepoa on the Hauraki Plains. During the 1950s, George Bacchus served as President of the Association, now known as the Bio Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association in New Zealand, with Colin Mahon as secretary. The Bacchus family farm, where George lived until his death in 1966, was one of the first in New Zealand in which biodynamic methods were systematically applied to a whole productive unit (Atkinson, 1967).

After World War II, phosphate fertilisers became widely available again. While interest in natural methods of agriculture and in biodynamics persisted amongst share milkers and smallholders, who had been well represented in the Association from the earliest years, the owners of larger farms lost interest in alternative methods of agriculture, and resumed the use of commercial fertilisers in the interests of increased production. During the 1950s the Association was reduced to around 50 or 60 members (Mahon, 1994).

From its inception in 1939, the Association, and biodynamic activity in New Zealand, had been centred on Auckland and the upper North Island. However, interest in biodynamics had been building up in the Hawke's Bay, close to the heartland of New Zealand Anthroposophy. In 1958 George Winkfield passed the task of making the preparations to Michael Jackson, who had been in Europe studying biodynamics but now was based in Havelock North, and in the same year it was decided to bring the executive of the Association to Napier. Gait Wiersma, who owned a small farm and orchard near Hastings, became President (Mulder, 1994).

The move to centre activities in Hawke's Bay bought a reinvigoration to the Association. Gait Wiersma began making visits to biodynamicists throughout the country, giving lectures and stimulating interest. Although relatively few large-scale farmers were involved, membership began to increase again through the 1960s, coincident with an increased interest amongst the general public in natural methods of gardening and agriculture, and concerns about the use of chemical pesticides, raised by the American biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson in her widely read book *Silent Spring* (1962) (Fitzsimons, 1989). As a sign of the growing strength of the movement, in 1964 members proposed registration in New Zealand of the international Demeter trademark for certified biodynamic produce, although this did not actually materialise until 1986 (BDNL, 1994).

Concluding remarks

Rudolf Steiner's ideas for agriculture reached New Zealand in 1930 via Steiner's *The Agriculture Course* (in English translation). New Zealanders corresponded with like minded individuals from around the world and visited biodynamic farms in Germany, Switzerland and Britain to extend and consolidate the book knowledge that they derived from their copies of *The Agriculture Course*.

There are at least two streams of opportunity for further research on the history of biodynamics in New Zealand since (a) fifteen recipients of early copies of *The Agriculture Course* to arrive in New Zealand between 1930-1938 have recently been identified (Paull, 2018) and (b) lecture visits of the German Anthroposophist Dr Alfred Meebold (1863-1952) to Australasia have been reported (Paull, 2014). In the meantime, biodynamics continues to attract and retain practitioners of Rudolf Steiner's distinctive form of organic agriculture in New Zealand.

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