

## A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Review, by Dr Philip Conford

Over the past six years or so, Patrick Noble has written a number of books on matters which should be of serious concern to supporters of the organic movement: among them, the finitude of our planet's resources (particularly fossil fuels); the real meaning of the word "economics", and the possible revival of local markets. These publications have failed to arouse much of a response, and it is fair to say that Noble's style, while distinctive and forceful, is not always easily accessible. Nonetheless, I persist in thinking that Noble is addressing issues which are vitally important, both for the organic movement and for our society as a whole and its prospects of survival.

At this point, I must declare an interest: Patrick Noble sent me the typescript of his latest manifesto – the best so far - and asked for an endorsement, which, alongside one from Professor Jules Pretty, now appears on the book's back cover. It reads as follows: "Patrick Noble's writings preserve the organic movement's authentic radical spirit". By this I mean that Noble is uncompromising in his insistence that the movement's values and principles are fundamentally incompatible with the existing system of food production and distribution. This system is based on a consumerist philosophy and on the assumption that we shall always be able to find limitless alternatives to fossil fuels: in short, that things can go on indefinitely as they are. Noble is in effect reminding us of what E. F. Schumacher drew to our attention more than 40 years ago in *Small is Beautiful*, a book which powerfully motivated a generation of radical environmentalists and organic cultivators.

The sculptor and typographer Eric Gill claimed of his life as a craftsman: "My work is my leisure; my leisure is my work". Consumerist culture on the other hand, suggests Noble, manifests the "post-modern perversity that we agree to unhappy work to pay for happiness at leisure". Schumacher's posthumous collection of essays *Good Work* addressed the problem of how humanity might work in a satisfying and creative way without degrading the natural world; one possible answer was what he termed "intermediate technology". But this idea can be traced back further. Schumacher had joined the Soil Association as early as 1951, at a time when the ruralist H.J. Massingham was a dominant figure. Four years earlier, Massingham's symposium *The Small Farmer* had appeared, containing an essay by the industrial historian L.T.C. Rolt on "Small Machines for Small Farms", in praise of a craftsmanship which could use machinery to serve its skills. Rolt advocated "the dispersal of the concentration of productive power, self-sufficiency instead of specialisation, diversity in place of uniformity, an economy of small producers instead of a society of irresponsible machine-minders". It seems likely that Schumacher was familiar with Rolt's ideas; it is certain that they influenced

Schumacher's contemporary John Seymour, to whose ideal of self-sufficiency the skills of craftsmanship were integral.

Patrick Noble's new book stands squarely in this tradition, which is also the tradition of the organic movement. The author describes his purpose as "to search for ways in which citizens can assert the responsibility which is currently denied them". So much of the contemporary organic movement is concerned with what we consume, and how much; Noble on the other hand reasserts the importance of those who produce and argues that when the present system is no longer sustainable we shall have to re-discover the trials and pleasures of our own creativity.

Our consumerism is irresponsible in another way, too. Noble aims some telling shafts at the "moral balance-sheet" through which we absolve our guilt about participating in oil-based, centralised distribution systems. Most readers, I guess, will feel uncomfortable as Noble suggests that their ethical purchases and subscriptions to worthy causes are attempts to compensate for being implicated in a network of economic relations to which they are in theory opposed. Environmentalism has been subsumed by consumerist principles; the organic movement has been quite mistaken in imagining that it could change the system from within; supermarkets prevent the development of alternatives by sucking life out of town centres; organic licences should be removed from any centralised distribution system: such is the gist of Noble's case for the prosecution.

The organic movement's drive to sell its products, which gathered momentum in the 1980s, stemmed from the ineluctable fact that producers would not otherwise be able to survive. Hand in hand with the economic imperative went an optimistic belief that selling organic products within supermarkets would help to change the food system. This pragmatic approach has been one of the organic movement's most debated issues during the past twenty years or more. As an organic farmer for 35 years, Patrick Noble can hardly be accused of ignoring economic realities; but since the present system is oil-based, centralised and vulnerable, and since it works against the possibility of creating what, following Ivan Illich, he calls a "convivial" economy, he believes that the organic movement should have nothing to do with it. Indeed, goods on supermarket shelves displaying the Soil Association symbol are in fact working against the movement's interests.

This may sound rather extreme in an age when the organic movement's "success" is measured, for example, by whether the growth trend for the market "is now at +1.8% versus -1.6% for non-organic" (Helen Browning, *The Organic Grower*, Winter 2014). But we should bear in mind that the movement's pioneers regarded the unproductive middle-man or trader as an enemy of the interests of both producers and consumers. They emphasised the importance of the local, the regional and the small-scale, and deplored the way in which chain-stores took the heart and variety out of market towns. In Patrick Noble's view, the organic movement is now paying the price for having struck a Faustian bargain with the powerful, its goods having become an insignificant niche brand in an amoral casino. It would be wiser,

he believes - to slip quietly away from the narcissism of power and concentrate on creating alternative networks against the day when the infrastructure crumbles.

Noble considers that the organic movement has made a mistake in emphasising health foods rather than husbandry. The organic movement has in fact always emphasised the importance of health, but its concept of health (a word which it has generally associated with “wholeness” and “holiness”) was originally much more comprehensive than a concern with merely personal benefits. It included the health of soil and environment, and of animals and plants; the need for a balance between rural and urban in national life; and the health of the economic system: hence its close association in the early days with the monetary reform movement. Like the advocates of Social Credit from the inter-war years, Noble sees money not as something essentially static, to be preserved and stored; but as a form of energy, useful only when it is flowing.

This sense of a cyclical process is at the heart of the organic philosophy: it is known as “the rule of return” of wastes to the soil, and is both biologically and ethically sound, recognising that we must put back as much as we take out; we must not be mere consumers of the planet’s stored fertility. For this reason, Noble dismisses the idea that bio-fuels will provide an answer to our energy problems. Biomass equations are static, but life *flows*; bio-fuels, ignoring the rule of return, are wrong in principle.

Noble’s book takes aim at various other targets, with an invigorating disregard for reputations. Contemporary science, promoted by figures such as television celeb Brian Cox, is for Noble little more than a tool of the powerful. Far from being sceptical, it offers our culture a particular, compulsory vision of life, and shows remarkably little curiosity about the earth which sustains us. A truly scientific agriculture, for instance, would study the breathtaking complexities of the soil, about which we know very little and on which we depend for our survival. In his frequent reminders to the reader of the importance of recognising limits and working with natural laws, Noble again takes us back to the ideas of those thinkers who established the principles on which organic practice should be based.

Evidently worn down by critics who ask him what he proposes to put in the place of the existing system, Patrick Noble devotes pages 253-70 to various suggestions, in a section much more detailed than anything he has offered in his earlier works. Here he owes a good deal to Ann Pettifor’s recent book *Money: How Society Can Break the Despotism of Finance*: a title straight from the stable of the Social Crediters of 80 years ago.

Though uncompromising in his denunciations, Noble does not regard his views as apocalyptic. He sees his book as a challenge to us to take charge of our capabilities and use our accumulated skills and experiences, both individual and cultural. We have been living a dream, and will shortly have to wake up and return to normality. There is nothing to fear in this, he believes. We have surrendered our creative powers with the result that others profit from our passivity; and we waste our lives in the pursuit of one which will supposedly be better. Once awake, we will

see the beauty of the world around us, and discover the pleasure of working with it rather than trying to escape it.

Looking at London commuters mesmerised by their electronic devices, one wonders whether Noble's vision is not impossibly optimistic. But it can equally be seen as a thoroughly viable alternative to social arrangements which are now terminally vulnerable.