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To cite this article: Michael Roche, Gui Dib & Geoffrey Watson (2021) Bringing biodynamic agriculture to New Zealand in the 1920s and 1930s, Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online, 16:1, 86-99, DOI: [10.1080/1177083X.2020.1764065](https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2020.1764065)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2020.1764065>



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Published online: 25 May 2020.



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# Bringing biodynamic agriculture to New Zealand in the 1920s and 1930s

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## ABSTRACT

Biodynamic agriculture as a form of alternative agriculture dates to a series of lectures delivered by philosopher Rudolf Steiner in 1924 at Schloss Koberwitz (then in Germany now Kobierzyce in Poland). In 2019 biodynamic agriculture occupies some 190,000 ha in 55 countries, though nearly half remains concentrated in Germany. This paper explores the introduction of biodynamic agriculture principles and practices to New Zealand in the 1920s and 1930s.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 January 2020

Accepted 28 April 2020

## KEYWORDS

Biodynamic agriculture; New Zealand; history; agrifood

## Introduction

‘Conventional’ and ‘Alternative’ agriculture have been the binary categories into which most contemporary agrifood studies divide where organic production systems are emblematic of the latter, although synthetic food and plant based ‘meat’ has the potential to disrupt this two-way division (Moaut et al. 2019). Organic production in the British world is usually originally associated with the efforts of Lord Northbourne in 1940 (Paull 2014). Frequently subsumed within a larger category of ‘organic agriculture’ is Biodynamic agriculture (e.g. Kirchmann 1994; McMahon 2005). Although Massey University agricultural science researchers (Reganold et al. 1993, p. 349) in a paired comparison of 16 conventional and biodynamic farms across New Zealand reached the conclusion that, ‘the biodynamic farms were just as often financially viable as their neighbouring conventional farms and representative conventional farms’, that research did not really get to the heart of biodynamic agriculture. In any case financial performance may be the result of more than just a specific set of on farm production practices. Biodynamic agriculture is of interest in other ways to agrifood scholars, because of the manner whereby the tension between production and marketing is managed. As Lewis and Cassells (2014, p. 177), drawing on Bourdieu, observe, ‘the spiritual underpinning of the biodynamic approach imbues the experience with a form of spiritual capital that is not captured within traditional interpretations of capital’.

With reference to ‘spiritual capital’, it is less the contemporary biodynamic agriculture scene that is the focus of this paper than its early arrival and uptake in New Zealand, where

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it has long been a resilient form of alternative agriculture (Paterson 2001). Here the paper takes up Turbott's (2019) suggestion, from more of a religious studies background, for further biographical inquiry on biodynamic practitioners in New Zealand and pairs it with Ritchie and Campbell's (1996, p. 10) observation, that 'tracing the historical development of the organic movement in New Zealand is a necessary prerequisite to understanding the contemporary dynamics of the emerging organic commodity system'. Accordingly the paper charts the transfer of biodynamic ideas to New Zealand and falls into four parts, the first concerned with Rudolf Steiner's 1924 agricultural course at Koberwitz out of which biodynamic agriculture emerged. The term 'biodynamic agriculture' was originally used by Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer and popularised by him in 1939. The second part briefly considers the pioneers of biodynamic agriculture in Australia which provides a comparison for the third part on New Zealand pioneers, and finally the connection between Anthroposophy and biodynamics in New Zealand is explored.

Much social science agrifood research is present and future oriented, concerned with what 'is' and/or what 'ought to be'. Historical contributions to an interdisciplinary agrifood literature may help understand what 'is' (and what may yet be) by drawing attention to the significance of earlier eras in terms of ideology and technology (broadly defined). Furthermore, a category, such as 'Alternative agriculture' may be essentialised when it might usefully be recognised that it actually contains various strands, some of which are at risk of being overlooked. More precisely, some of the 'Alternative agriculture' approaches that have attracted greater attention over the last couple of decades, have existed for much longer as a pool of ideas and practices and it is helpful to recognise this. Also, in this instance 'organic' can be recognised as having several not always readily compatible threads.

### **Rudolf Steiner's 1924 Agriculture Course at Koberwitz**

In 1924, Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, having earlier parried the opportunity, at the instigation of Count Carl Keyserlingk presented a series of eight lectures, over a ten-day period, to over 100 farmers, mainly from Germany at Koberwitz (Paull 2011a). Keyserlingk was an Anthroposophist, following the spiritual science teaching of Steiner who believed the spirit world could through study, thought, and meditation be understood by humans and these insights also applied to the material world (Turbott 2019). Keyserlingk was motivated by the changes to agricultural practices that were occurring in 1920s Germany, in the wake of the widespread use of synthetic fertilisers (Paull 2011c; Selg 2010). These, he believed, included declining crop yields, reduced seed viability, and more crop diseases. Steiner had been asked by farmers and land owners 'to provide them with spiritual scientific insights into problems that were being encountered in agriculture' (Courtney 2005, p. 2). In New Zealand in the 1920s, Stuart and Campbell (2004) also identify soil degradation concerns where the orthodox response was a state led commitment to imported phosphate fertiliser and agricultural science and organics developed as a minority alternative. According to Paull (2011a) Steiner had already organised some preliminary agricultural experiments at the Goetheanum, his base, at Dornach in Switzerland, from 1921 to 1923.

The agricultural lectures were subsequently published, though not in English until 1929, and have remained in print in various forms (e.g. Steiner 2004). Steiner himself

died in 1925 and it fell to his associates to develop his general principles into a set of biodynamic practices. Paull (2011b, p. 33) observed that Steiner had told the attendees that, 'the basis of the new Anthroposophic agriculture needed to be based on experiment not dogma, that the new agriculture was to rely on practical demonstration of results, and that the course was effectively commercial-in-confidence until there were proven replicable results'. In 1925 an Experimental Circle was set up to share information. Paull (2011c) uses the date of signing off to individuals to copies of the published editions of the agriculture lectures from the Agricultural Experimental Course at the Goetheanum as a measure of the diffusion of biodynamic agricultural ideas and practices. Of the original 432 copies printed in German the vast majority went to individuals in Germany and other continental European countries, though six went to the UK, two to the USA, and one to Canada (Paull 2011c, p. 22). Courtney (2005) summarises the three essential features of biodynamic agriculture as follows, firstly, treating the farm as an organism, secondly, that farmers efforts are set against the movements of the sun, moon, and entire solar system, and thirdly, the use of nine herbal and mineral 'preparations' that are applied to the soil. As Courtney (2005, p. 7) observes, 'biodynamics cannot be grasped by intellects that are conditioned by an education that currently is so focused on the material world'.

### **Experimental circle of anthroposophic farmers and gardeners**

The directions suggested in Steiner's agriculture lectures were developed further by his followers in Dornach, particularly Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. By the late 1920s these principles were being taken up by small numbers of farmers from beyond Germany and continental Europe.

### **Australian connections**

Australian connections with the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners based in Dornach have been carefully examined (Paull 2013). Likewise, the Australian pioneers of biodynamic farming Ernesto Genoni and Ileen Macpherson have been the subject of biographical treatment (Paull 2014; 2017). Ernesto was an Italian, a trained artist who journeyed to Australia to work on his brother's farm and who volunteered for the Australian Imperial Forces in 1916, before being conscripted into the Italian army and later being imprisoned as a conscientious objector. By 1916 he was also a Theosophist. The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875, as a 'universal brotherhood of humanity' and encouraged the comparative study of religion, philosophy and science as well as the investigation of the laws of nature and the deeper human powers (*New Zealand Theosophical Magazine* 1906). Ernesto set aside Theosophy and joined the Anthroposophical Society in Milan in 1919 and the following year travelled to its headquarters, at the Goetheanum in Switzerland, where he met Steiner. Still at the Goetheanum in 1924, he does not appear to have travelled to attend the Agriculture Course at Koberwitz (Paull 2014). In 1926, Ernesto returned to Australia intending to establish himself as an artist. Instead, he joined the Experimental Circle in 1928 and returned to Europe in 1930 to study biodynamic agriculture in Switzerland, Germany, and England. In 1932, he founded the Anthroposophical Society of Victoria. For the following two decades he farmed on biodynamic lines. His partner in life and on the

property, the original Demeter Farm in Australia (from 1934) was Ileen Macpherson. Ileen was introduced to Anthroposophy by Ernesto in 1933. She joined the Experimental Circle in 1936. Paull (2017, p. 51) observes that although Australia was far removed from Dornach and Ileen discovered it only after Steiner's death 'she embraced anthroposophy with a passion and treasured his [Steiner's] writings in English translation ... and set forth to put Steiner's ideas into motion in the Antipodes, by establishing Demeter farm'.

The next group of Australians to join the Experimental Circle in 1929, all still comparatively early on, received the English language version of the lectures. They were a small group, four from 1929 to 1931 and then a second group in the late 1930s (possibly as a result of the wider impact of Pfeiffer's publications) (Table 1). NSW, particularly the environs of Sydney was the location of most practitioners.

### ***New Zealand connections***

The first New Zealand members of the Experimental Circle at Dornach have also been identified (Paull 2018). They lag temporally slightly behind Australia in joining. As with Australia there are slightly later two pulses in the early and late 1930s (Table 2). All however, received the English language translation of Steiner's agricultural lectures. There is some clustering apparent in the New Zealand addresses, particularly in Havelock North in Hawkes Bay but also in suburban Remuera in Auckland. There was only one South Islander. It is also notable that the New Zealand contingent out numbers the Australians 15 to 12. In 1938 the respective populations were 6.89 million against 1.61 million for New Zealand. Turbott (2019) identifies as Anthroposophist's, several of the pioneering biodynamic agriculture practitioners in New Zealand, including all four of those who in 1930 joined the Agricultural Experimental Circle (Table 2). Anthroposophy meantime had come to New Zealand via Theosophy and Mrs Emma Richmond, taking root in Havelock North around 1912. By the 1920s Emma Richmond's Rachel daughter and son-in-law Bernard Crompton Smith were both committed Anthroposophists and promoters of Steiner education (Ellwood 1993).

Some fragments of the lives of four pioneering figures follow. Bernard Crompton Smith (1870–1958), son of prominent surveyor and co-founder of the Polynesian Society Stephenson Percy Smith, was admitted to the Bar in Wellington in 1907. He then practiced in Picton, where he immersed himself in the life of the community, before his marriage to

**Table 1.** Australian members of the Agricultural Experimental Circle Dornach.

No	Name	Date	Address	Experimental location
165	Ernesto Genoni	1928	Gippsland	–
E14	Crawford McDowell	1929	Sydney	Sydney
E17	Emilio Genoni	1930	Broome hill WA	Broome hill
E24	Charles Burford	1931	Sydney	Near Sydney
E32	Kenneth Milroy Temple	1931	Sydney	Sydney
E50	Ruby MacPherson	1935	Gulargambone NSW	Mt Tenandra Gulargambone
E55	Ruth Beale	1936	Sydney	Mt Colah NSW
E52	Ileen MacPherson	1936	Dandenong Vic	Dandenong
E66	Robert Williams	1937	Sydney	Willoughby Sydney
E3	Lucy Badham	1938	Sydney	–
E4	Eric Nicholls	1939	Sydney	Castlecrag Sydney
E25	Frank Kelly	1939	Sydney	–

Source: Simplified from Paull (2013).

**Table 2.** New Zealand members of the Agricultural Experimental Circle Dornach.

No	Name	Date	Address	Notes
12E	Bernard Crompton-Smith	1930	Havelock North	# Anthroposophist
15E	George Winkfield	1930	Remuera, Auckland	# Anthroposophist
16E	James Coe	1930 dup. 1931	Remuera, Auckland	# Anthroposophist
10E	Clarence H Jones	1930	St Martins, Christchurch	
31E	Henry Golden	1931	Lower Hutt	
29E	Ivon Fry <sup>a</sup>	1931	Henderson	
34E	Ada Williamson	1932	Remuera, Auckland	Same street as Coe
35E	Thomas Cecil Rhodes Jackson	1932	Woodville	
9E	Alice Wilson	1932	Havelock North	
33E	Mary Jean Bauchop	1932	Havelock North	
562	George Bacchus	1933	Woodville c/o Jackson	# Anthroposophist
12E	S. Crompton-Smith	1935	Havelock North	# Anthroposophist
14E	D.W.S. MacKenzie	1937	Papatoetoe	
30E	Esther Avery	1938	Havelock North	same address as N.A Avery
30E	N.A. Avery	1938	Havelock North	

<sup>a</sup>Ivon Fry (1894–1942) merits further attention as a former clerk who served in WWI as a flight Sub Lieutenant in the Royal Navy and farmed as a fruit grower at Henderson in West Auckland from the late 1920s to his death in 1942. Potentially he is one of Merrill's (1983) 'realists' dependent on biodynamic produce for his livelihood.

Source: Simplified from Paull (2018) and Turbott (2019).

school teacher Rachel Richardson in 1912 and relocation to Auckland later that same year. For health reasons, Crompton Smith decided to leave both Auckland and the legal profession (Turbott 2013, p. 34). In 1915, Rachel and Bernard Crompton Smith founded a small co-educational school (St George's) at Havelock North in Hawkes Bay. From 1914 he is listed on electoral rolls as an orchardist. Turbott (2019, p. 24) notes that, Crompton Smith had established his Havelock North orchard by 1913, 'and certainly was conducting his life by anthroposophical principles at that time'. In 1926, the couple journeyed to the UK and Europe to attend an education conference and study Steiner's system of education. They then proposed to visit Dornach and visit the Steiner school in Stuttgart, with a view to implementing these principles in their Hawkes Bay school (Press 1936, p. 2). While Rachel's interests were in education, Bernard presumably was absorbing the ideas contained in Steiner's agriculture lectures. Turbott (2019, pp. 24–25) also refers to anecdotal evidence that Crompton Smith was actually 'the earliest in New Zealand to adopt Steiner's suggestions for the use of special preparations on the soil', a role usually accorded to George Winkfield.

George Winkfield (1873–1957) was the second individual from New Zealand to join the Experimental Circle. Winkfield was born in Manchester, the son of a successful marine artist. Apprenticed as an engineer with Siemens Brothers, he completed a degree in electrical engineering at London University. A friend, the prominent Anthroposophist and electrical engineer Daniel Dunlop, introduced Winkfield to theosophy and later Anthroposophy. Winkfield adopted the latter in 1926 (Turbott 2019). Joining the Cable Service in England in 1900, Winkfield transferred to the Pacific Cable Board in 1905 as a cable officer on *HMCS Iris* based in Auckland, and later became a [telegraph] cable consultant to the New Zealand Post Office. In 1930, Winkfield accompanied by his wife and daughter, as well as retired Auckland businessman James Coe and his wife Agnes, travelled to the Goetheanum in Switzerland, joined the Agricultural Experimental Circle and learned how to make biodynamic preparations. He was introduced to many leading Anthroposophists and in 1931 attended the first conference of the Biodynamic Association in Great Britain (Turbott 2019). On his return to Auckland, Winkfield established a large

garden at his Remuera property and began the production of biodynamic preparations. Retiring from engineering work in 1933, he maintained a correspondence with leading Anthropologists and biodynamic practitioners, such as Pfeiffer and Dr Guenther Wachsmuth. He built up a large library and became a New Zealand authority on biodynamics and as well as being one of the few suppliers of the essential preparations. This included playing a leading role in the Rudolf Steiner Biological Dynamic Association for Soil and Crop Improvement and its successor organisations (Dib 2018).

James Coe was the other of the three originals to visit Dornach and join the Agricultural Experimental Circle in 1930. London born, James Coe (c.1864–1949) remains a more elusive figure, referred to only in passing by Turbott (2013) and Paull (2018), and by background and career he stands somewhat apart from Crompton Smith and Winkfield. In consequence, closer attention is given to him here. Coe was the second son of a London carpenter who found employment as a stationer's assistant before migrating a decade later to New Zealand in 1891. Coe operated a Queen Street stationery business with John Patterson. He joined the Ponsonby Masonic Lodge in 1892 (*Auckland Star* 1892, p. 5). Almost immediately he also became involved in the goldmining industry in the Coromandel (*Auckland Star* 1892, p. 8) with 500 shares in Southern Cross Gold Mining Company 1895 (*New Zealand Herald* 1895, p. 1) and as director of a company set up to work the 30 acres 'City of Auckland claim'. He was also involved in an attempted takeover for Bunkers Hill, a quartz mine in the Coromandel a move which attracted critical comment in the press (*Observer* 1896, p. 9). It is possible that the sale of his second home at Shelly Bay for £1400 in 1896 was tied to cashflow problems or further mining investments (*Auckland Star* 1897, p. 4). Other interests included the Dawn Day claim in 1896 and Hauraki Freeholds Ltd [500 shares] in 1898 (*New Zealand Herald* 1898, p. 8).<sup>1</sup>

In 1899, he acted as liquidator of the Auckland Exploration Company Ltd suggesting a degree of competence and trust (*Auckland Star* 1899, p. 5). That said, there are several magistrate's courts cases for small sums both for and against Coe reported in the newspapers (e.g. *New Zealand Herald* 1908, p. 7).

By 1903, he was also a Director of Buchanan and Company, an Auckland manufacturing and wholesale jeweller (*Auckland Star* 1903). That same year he also became a Director of the Birkenhead and Northcote Gas Company (*New Zealand Herald* 1904, p. 7). He was chair by 1924 and remained a Director until the 1930s (*Auckland Star* 1924, p. 9). In 1905, he was a director of Champion Mining Ltd describing himself as an Agent (*Observer* 1905, p. 20). On the 1905 electoral roll Coe described himself as an 'importer'. In 1909, he was the founding member and Master of the Maungawhau No. 168 Mt Eden lodge (Bevins 2010, p. 223).

There were other signs of social and business respectability. In 1907, Coe was nominated for the Committee of the Auckland Racing Club (*Auckland Star* 1907, p. 5). He remained on the Committee in 1910 (*New Zealand Herald* 1910, p. 7) and in 1919 was elected to an important role as one of the club's two stewards (*Auckland Star* 1919, p. 7). In 1910, he was one of the 14 local businessmen who nominated Oliver Nicholson for a further term as Mayor of Eden Borough (*New Zealand Herald* 1910, p. 6). Nicholson, also a senior freemason, would later be depicted as key figure in the Auckland business cliques of the 1900s to 1930s (Stone 1987). His wife Agnes Coe featured regularly in the society pages of the Auckland newspapers as did Coe himself, as a committee

member of the Eden Bowling club, a member of the Auckland Photographic Club, and the Grafton Shakespeare Club. From 1912 to 1920 he described himself as a ‘rubber merchant’ in the *Auckland Directory* and from 1921 again and thereafter as an ‘importer’.<sup>2</sup>

His business dealings do not immediately suggest likely pathways to biodynamics. His Masonic Lodge membership may have involved more than just business connections, but another facet of Coe’s life does, however, point to closer intellectual connections to Rudolf Steiner. In 1916, Mrs Agnes Coe hosted the inaugural meeting and was a committee member of the newly formed ‘Mother’s Thought Guild’ established in Australia and intended to promote the ‘creating of a beautiful mental atmosphere in the home, and by so doing helping the evolution of children’ (*Observer* 1916, p. 8) [So far as we can establish James and Edith Coe were childless]. This may hint at some progressive attitudes to family and education. From 1916 to 1921, Coe gave some 16 public lectures at the Auckland Theosophical Society (Table 3).<sup>3</sup>

Rudolf Steiner had become head of the German section of the Theosophical Society in 1902, but along with most of the German Theosophists broke away to form the Anthroposophical Society in 1912. Theosophical ideas were circulating in New Zealand from the late 1880s. A Wellington Lodge was set up in 1888 and another in Auckland in 1892 (Ellwood 1993). Coe’s lectures suggest much reflection on the human condition, doubtless sharpened by the backdrop of World War I.

Over the next six years from 1921 Coe shifted his ground. Ellwood (1993) explains, Theosophy in New Zealand was in a period of tumultuous change and by 1927 Coe had become one of the Auckland group of Anthroposophists. In 1930, after his return from Dornach, he became a member of the, five strong, Auckland Executive Committee. After Agnes’ death in 1934, he in 1935 remarried an Englishwoman, Edith Rose Williams who was a leading figure in Auckland anthroposophical circles. Edith had met Steiner, though through her influence the Auckland group interacted more with English Anthroposophists than directly with those in Dornach, producing something approximating a ‘schism’ in the New Zealand movement (Turbott 2013). Although Coe signed for a copy of the Agricultural Lectures at Dornach there seems to be no evidence that he directly engaged in producing food along biodynamic lines, even though biodynamics might be

**Table 3.** James Coe’s Auckland Theosophical Society Lectures 1916–1921.

Date	Title
15 January 1916	The human machine
26 February 1916	Modern religion
13 May 1916	The spirit of the hive
19 Aug 1916	The subliminal self
27 January 1917	What is Theosophy?
9 June 1917	War and the Periodic law
8 May 1920	Religion
22 May 1920	The Realm of doubt
26 June 1920	Our daily life and occultism
14 August 1920	The meaning of suffering
23 August 1920	Suffering and its benefits
11 September 1920	At the gate of theosophy
20 November 1920	The Rosicrucian Philosophy
11 December 1920	A logical view of Reincarnation
27 January 1921	What is Theosophy?
19 February 1921	The Gate of Wisdom

Source: Compiled from public notices in the *Auckland Star*.



regarded as a natural outcome of anthroposophical thinking, which is not to say that he did not avail himself of some of the small quantities of local biodynamically grown fruits and vegetables. Turbott (2019) records that he was, however, an inaugural member of the Rudolf Steiner Biological Dynamic Association for Soil and Crop Improvement established in Auckland in 1939.

The last of the 1930 group was Clarence Jones (1906–1993). Little of Jones' life is recoverable from the public record, but by 1928 he was working as a 'gardener' – a capacious label which could include everything from an unskilled labourer to having completed an apprenticeship and sat exams. He continued to list himself as a gardener into the mid-1930s, but by 1942 described himself as a nurseryman, initially in St Martins and later at Mt Pleasant, until his retirement by 1957. There was, as Turbott (2013) notes, a small Christchurch group operating by 1927.

Of the later New Zealanders to join the Experimental Circle, arguably along with George Winkfield, the most important to the spread of biodynamic agriculture to the country, was another Anthroposophist George Bacchus (1902–1966). Bacchus grew up on a farm and graduated from Canterbury College with a degree in electrical engineering. He was employed on railway and hydroelectrical projects in Marlborough and the Waitaki basin. Turbott (2019, p. 27–28) identifies the critical moment where

[i]nfluenced 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.

Preparing himself by learning some German, Bacchus visited the Goetheanum in 1934, joined the Experimental Circle, and worked on biodynamic farms and gardens in Germany and England. On returning to New Zealand in 1935, he summarised his findings for New Zealand Anthroposophist's in an article 'demonstrating the mixture of spiritual philosophy and practical advice, based on field trials and experiment, which is characteristic of the biodynamic movement' (Turbott 2019, p. 28). Thereafter Bacchus, at the instigation of Mrs Dorothy Jackson, worked on the 400acre Jackson farm 'Durslade', near Woodville. In its 'large vegetable garden and orchard, Bacchus demonstrated the use of biodynamic preparations and composting methods' (Turbott 2019, p. 28). Her husband T.C.R. Jackson had joined the Experimental Circle in 1932. Official war time inquiries in 1941 revealed, however, that he, 'did not proceed with the Bio-dynamic farming owing to the shortage of labour and not having enough time to carry out the work himself' (Goodwin to Director, Horticulture Division 22 October 1941). A commitment remained, however, for in his will Jackson left a bequest to the Steiner Queenswood School in Hastings (Jackson Probate 1981).

While at Durslade, Bacchus met and married Nancy Crompton-Smith, the niece of Bernard Crompton Smith. Nancy's father, himself would join the Experimental Circle in 1935. In 1938, George and Nancy were members of a group of ten New Zealanders to visit the Imperial Bureau of Soil Science and the Rothamsted Experimental Station. Others included Dr C.S. Hopkirk [Veterinary Research Station at Wallaceville], Lt. Col. H.A. Reid [New Zealand House, London], F. Winstone, F.H. Winstone and J.C. Young of Auckland all with interests in superphosphate, and J.C. Newhook then a student at Veterinary College, London. One can imagine some vibrant conversations within this

group over the future direction of agriculture in New Zealand. Other members of the Winstone family were directors of the Birkenhead and Northcote Gas Company along with James Coe.

Bacchus described himself as having come to England, ‘to take up farming on behalf of the [British] Bio-dynamic Association’ and explained that biodynamic methods in agriculture involved the ‘care and improvement of manure and compost and the preservation of soil fertility’ (*Evening Post* 1938, p. 9). After working on biodynamic farms throughout Britain during the WWII, George and Nancy with four children returned to New Zealand in 1947 to commence dairy farming on the Hauraki Plains. The farm was one of the first in New Zealand to which biodynamic principles were fully applied (Turbott 2019). Bacchus served as President of the Biodynamic and Gardening Association of New Zealand in the 1950s.

L. (Lawrence) Courtney Hall was one New Zealand anthroposophist who has not been identified, in published lists, as joining the Experimental Circle at Dornach, but who never-the-less was heavily involved in biodynamic agriculture. A former teacher and radio broadcaster Hall had been running his orchard in Kerikeri on biodynamic lines from 1939. This indirectly points to the importance of Winkfield as a local point of contact and expertise (assisted by Pfeiffer’s writing in English) so that it was no longer necessary to directly connect with Dornach. Hall was also a foundation member of the Rudolf Steiner Biological Dynamic Association for Soil and Crop Improvement. They numbered 30 in 1939 but had expanded to 200 by 1945 (Jones and Mowatt 2016, p. 1266). Hall spoke regularly and widely on biodynamic agriculture.<sup>4</sup> His later involvement in the attempted purchase of a property in Kerikeri as an experimental and demonstration farm attracted criticism from the Association and led to his resignation and withdrawal from its affairs (Dib 2018; Turbott 2019).

To those identified by Paull and Turbott might be added a forgotten figure with a New Zealand connection: Grange Kirkcaldy (1895–1979), originally from Dunedin. Kirkcaldy was born in New Zealand in 1895. The son of a prominent Dunedin insurance underwriter, he passed the Teachers and Civil Service exam in 1911 and that same year sailed on the *Corinthic* for London. By 1914 he was student at Corpus Christi College at Cambridge and enlisted in the university brigade before transferring as a 2nd Lieutenant to the Army Service Corps on account of his ability to drive and speak French. Later he served in the Royal Highlanders (Black Watch) rising to Lieutenant by early 1918. In April of that same year Kirkcaldy was captured and remained a prisoner of war in Germany until his repatriation late in 1918 after which he was promoted to Captain. In 1919, he served in the Archangel campaign, the ill-fated Allied intervention in Russia, where he was wounded. Kirkcaldy married Mildred Robertson Nicholl in Chelsea in 1920. Mildred was the daughter of Sir William Robertson Nicholl (1851–1923) a Free Church of Scotland minister and influential journalist and newspaper editor. A son by his first marriage was Henry Maurice Dunlop Nicoll (1884–1953) a noted psychiatrist and onetime colleague of Carl Jung. From 1930, when he was placed on the retired list because of ill health Kirkcaldy resided at the Lodge of Auchindoir, Rhynie, Aberdeenshire (*Press* 1932, p. 15). In 1932, he resigned his commission as a Captain in the Black Watch in order to go farming at Rhynie on land purchased earlier in 1930. The move was inspired by Kirkcaldy and his wife’s shared commitment to Steiner’s anthroposophy (his oldest child attended the Steiner school at Streamham) particularly his viewing of the soil as a

'living organism'. That said the *Press* was incorrect in reporting in the same article that biodynamic agriculture was 'unknown in New Zealand', but this does signal its embryonic status in the Dominion (*Press* 1932, p. 14). At the time Kirkcaldy also wrote articles on agriculture for various Scottish newspapers. The success or otherwise of Kirkcaldy's farming venture and his connections to British biodynamic farmers remains unknown but warrants further attention.

## **Biodynamic agriculture in New Zealand**

The agrifood literature on the contemporary biodynamic agriculture scene in New Zealand is limited. Lewis and Cassells (2014, p. 180) describe biodynamics as 'a method of high quality food production that, proponents argue, works in partnership with nature and is underpinned by an ethical ecological spiritual approach to agriculture, food production and nutrition' and as 'a form of organic production that is underpinned by nonreligious spirituality' (Lewis and Cassells 2014, p. 187).

Two observations are of interest: Paterson (2001) reported on a 1992 survey of 81 biodynamic farmers in New Zealand of whom 36% were motivated by organic and environmentally friendly considerations and 25% by its philosophical and spiritual basis [presumably Anthroposophy] and 11% by economic considerations. Lewis et al. (2011) in a qualitative study of 11 biodynamic producers identify for the group four individual drivers and four business drivers underpinning their commitment. One combination of these with 'life style' as the individual driver, 'equity' as the business driver and 'spiritualist-philosopher' as the 'identity' is probably closest in outlook to the anthroposophist's who originally brought biodynamic agriculture to New Zealand. But have the links between anthroposophy and biodynamic agriculture that provided the pathway by which the latter was brought to New Zealand remained intact? This would seem to be an avenue for further research.

## **Conclusion**

The chronology of biodynamic agriculture is important. Initiated by Steiner's 1924 agriculture lectures, refined at Dornach, it was codified from around 1928 by Pfeiffer and was disseminated more widely in published form in 1939. Pfeiffer was invited to Northbourne's Betteshanger Summer School in 1939 to enable British farmers to become acquainted with his work. A British Bio-dynamic Association had been founded that same year. About 40 attended the nine-day course. Only in 1940 did Northbourne publish his *Look to the Land* which used the term 'organic farming' (Paull 2014a). Thus, it could be argued that biodynamics is the progenitor of the broader organic movement although other writers give prominence to the composting efforts of Sir Albert Howard (Barton 2001; Heckmann 2016) and connections to India (Shi-ming and Sauerborn 2006). Jerome Rodale in the USA has other supporters (Cruse 2014; Rodale 2015). Regardless, biodynamic agriculture ideas are brought to New Zealand comparatively early – by 1930 using membership of the Agricultural Experimental Circle as a guide, although Bernard Crompton Smith encountered them in an early form at Dornach in 1926. It is also noteworthy that the initial connection is by a direct link from New Zealand to Dornach involving actual visits of Anthroposophist's from New Zealand. To

undertake this, a certain degree of education and means were required. Biodynamic agriculture it might be claimed was brought to New Zealand by New Zealand residents as much as actively diffusing from the Goetheanum at Dornach (though Anthroposophy itself spreads to New Zealand). The importance of women to Anthroposophy in New Zealand ought also not to be underestimated. A biodynamic association in New Zealand dates from 1939, two years before the Humic Compost Club was founded (Stuart and Campbell 2004, p. 229). This also throws into sharp relief the much earlier establishment in 1922 in New Zealand of its progenitor 'natural food' organisation, the Food Reform Society, by dentist Dr Guy Chapman (Ritchie and Campbell 1996, p. 11). Thus, some of the empirics of the 'spiritual capital' of biodynamic agriculture may be framed. An anniversary history of the Soil and Health Association founded in 1942 points to the links back to Chapman and the Humic Compost and to the overseas influence of Rodale in the USA, but more importantly to the example of organics exponents Albert Howard and Lady Balfour in the UK (Meechin et al. 1993). Biodynamic agriculture is not much part of the anniversary history story although Enid Roberts is noted as a founding member of the Levin Compost Society, she was the wife of Ben Roberts, Minister of Agriculture (1943–1946) in the Labour Government, himself a biodynamic agriculture practitioner in the Wairarapa (Dib 2018).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Captain Francis Billington, the first Principal of Flock House, ultimately the Vice-Patron of the Soil and Health Association, played a prominent part in Biodynamic Association affairs as a supplier of preparations and author of Anthroposophically infused pamphlets and articles on the value of compost and peasant wisdom (Dib 2018).<sup>6</sup>

Departing from the Ritchie and Campbell (1996) argument, which draws attention to a link between national land degradation concerns and early organic production, the first Anthroposophist biodynamic producers in New Zealand, given the type and scale of their activities – market gardens, orchards, horticulture, and home gardening, were more attuned to the philosophical underpinnings of their food production practices than being directly concerned with accelerated soil erosion, soil degradation, and pasture degradation. The latter tended to impact pastoral farming particularly in the South Island high country and the North Island hill country. This would appear to be the first-hand understanding of few of the forerunners, although George Winkfield's engineering experiences can be cited as an exception. Biodynamic practices were not filtered primarily through any sort of Imperial metropole, although Bacchus visited the UK in 1938 and worked there on various biodynamic farms until returning to New Zealand in 1947. Bacchus' subsequent role in the development of Biodynamics in New Zealand also points to a situation that might be summarised as follows: It was initially essential to be an anthroposophist to know of biodynamic farming, but being one of the pioneering figures and having joined the Agricultural Experimental Circle of itself was not enough. It was not Crompton Smith, Coe, or Jones who took the lead; of the original four only George Winkfield played a prominent role in the practice and the spread of biodynamics. This is a role he shared with George Bacchus who was also not amongst the first to join the Experimental Circle from New Zealand. To account for this situation, it may be helpful to make use of Merrill's (1983) terms 'purists', who were not dependent on garden or farm for their income and 'realists', the full-time farmers using ecologically sound methods, where Coe was one of the former and Bacchus was one of the latter. However, simply conflating biodynamic agriculture with or within in organic agriculture

is to lose sight of the connection between the spiritual and material inherent in Steiner's ideas and the appreciation of how biodynamic agriculture came so quickly to New Zealand.

## Notes

1. This is not an exhaustive list. For instance, Coe was also involved with the Sir Julius Goldmining Company – a no liability company floated in 1895 in which he had 1000 shares and was listed as 'gentleman' (*Observer* 1895, p. 7) and in the spectacularly unsuccessful Napier Goldmining Company (*Auckland Star* 1896, p. 4).
2. Rubber manufacturer' seems to cover a number of possibilities stretching from shoe soles, hosing, stamps, to bike tyres and gum boots. Presumably not including car tyres which seem to be advertised separately and associated with international brands such as Dunlop.
3. Principles of Theosophy relating to the Periodic law - the 'ebb and flow of nature', the great law of equilibrium or balance which eventually equalises things' and 'the final law of evolution' (Stuart 1906, p. 113) might potentially link to an interest in systems of food production. The subject of Coe's lectures appears to engage with more central concerns of Theosophy.
4. *New Zealand Herald* 1941, p. 3; *Auckland Star* 1941, p. 14; *Northern Advocate* 1945, p. 5.
5. Roberts had addressed the Theosophical Society in Wellington on biodynamic farming in 1941 (*Evening Post* 1941, p. 10).
6. Billington was the first Principal of Flock House, an agricultural training establishment near Bulls set up for the children of Royal Navy and merchant seamen lost during WWI and funded by wool profits under the Commandeer bulk purchase agreements (Goodall 1962).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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