

Going round in crop circles



Sixty Harvests Left: How to Reach a Nature-Friendly Future
Philip Lymbery
(Bloomsbury, P, Q, C)

There is nothing new under the publishing sun. *Sixty Harvests Left*, by the chief executive of Compassion in World Farming (CWF), is the fourth major book critiquing industrial agriculture to thud onto my doorstep in as many months. After George Monbiot's *Regenesi*s, Jake Fienness's *Land Healer* and Sarah Langford's *Rooted*, what is left unsaid about evil Big Ag? Not a great deal, to be honest.

Somewhat bizarrely, Mr Fienness and Mr Monbiot are profiled in this book; I mention this from activist concern, as well as reader déjà vu. Has Nature-friendly farming become an echo chamber where we converse with ourselves, circulating the same set of proofs, rather than with the wider public? As someone tweeted at me last week about one of my own attempts to take up the pitchfork against Big Ag, in a volume from 2016: All these books, but the countryside is in the same sorry state.'

In case you have had your head stuck in the sandy eroded soil caused by industrialised farming, Philip Lymbery offers a sobering, cogent cadastral survey of its familiar ills. Such is soil degradation, due to the chemicals and the heavy machinery that, according to the UN, parts of the planet have only 60 harvests before they fail (hence the alarming title). We are talking 'Grapes of Wrath II'. Some 75% of antibiotics dispensed worldwide are fed to farm animals, the bulk of these prescriptions going to the poor beasts in factory-farmed systems.

'Mega farms' containing thousands of continuously housed cows, pigs or chickens are on the increase worldwide; according



Cows: an integral part of the British farming landscape or the harbingers of zoonotic destruction?

to CWF, Britain has nearly 800 megafarms, some housing as many as a million chickens or 20,000 pigs. Then you have climate change, in which agriculture is heavily implicated. Et cetera. In his role as head of CWF, Mr Lymbery gets to travel a lot. I was expecting the totemic deforestation of the Amazon for soya livestock-feed (up to two-thirds of arable land globally is used to feed factory-farmed pigs, chickens and cattle, as well as to run bio-fuel-powered vehicles) and I knew about the Chinese multi-storey pig farms. However, I confess to surprise that 'nearly all cows that are milked for Parmesan are housed permanently in stalls'.

Seeing the reality of factory farming made Mr Lymbery, one of life's good guys, 'weep'; I suggest that the cows, if they ever get their hooves on AK-47s, will shoot the lot of us *Homo sapiens*. Oh, wait a minute, the cows don't need to shoot us: intensive livestock farms are accidental laboratories for deadly zoonotic, cross-species diseases. We are not dealing with hypotheticals here.

Between 1997 and 2006, the H5N1 virus—or avian flu—which was transmitted from poultry to

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humans, achieved a 59% mortality rate among people affected (Covid-19's mortality rate is 1%). Factory farming plagues will kill us off, if starvation doesn't.

What is to be done? Mr Lymbery is an adherent—as are Miss Langford and Mr Fienness—of 'regenerative agriculture', the alt-farming system that replenishes the soil, sinks carbon, puts the cows outside on grass and eschews the need for inputs of chemical fertilisers or pesticides. He also proposes that world meat and dairy consumption be reduced 'by at least half globally in the next 30 years',

effectively ending the factory farming of livestock and freeing-up land for crops and re-naturing. So far so good. Where your livestock-keeping reviewer blew steam was Mr Lymbery's exaltation of vegan 'meat products'. If fermented gloop can be made to look and taste like meat, why keep any farm animals?

Sure enough, the author floats a future in which regenerative farming might 'move beyond farmed animals altogether'. This concedes too much to the vegan agenda (*Agromenes*, August 3). Our farm animals, on organic-type outdoor systems, are essential for biodiversity, from the conservation grazing of their front end to the insect-feeding poo at their rear. More, the old breeds have worth in their own right; a White Park cow with lineage dating back to the druids is no less wonderful an animal than a reintroduced beaver. And isn't veganism's *faux* meat a teensy bit hypocritical, a supercilious slur on the animal it imitates? At the very least, vegans might come up with their own original cuisine, or so it seems to me. If any one is listening.
John Lewis-Stempel

