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# Sir George Stapledon (1882–1960) and the Landscape of Britain

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## SUMMARY

This article is concerned with some aspects of the career of Sir George Stapledon, pioneer ecologist, geneticist and agricultural improver. In reviewing some of Stapledon's writings on the regeneration of rural Britain during the inter-war years it places his work within the social and cultural context of the time. Stapledon's suspicions of inductive science and reductionist economics, his concern with holism, 'spiritual values' and 'the nature of things' and his emphasis upon breadth of vision and the cultivation of the imagination was in stark contrast to many scientists of the day. However debatable the effects upon the 'natural' environment may have been, Stapledon's remarkable achievements in upland agricultural improvement were largely responsible for the retention of the social, cultural and economic infrastructure of the hills and uplands of today's Britain.

The English landscape, observed David Lowenthal in a recent article, is a consummate artefact of which virtually nothing is preserved of its original pristine state.<sup>1</sup> To those with the eye and the will to see it, that landscape remains an extraordinary palimpsest, moulded of successive layers of human endeavour from Mesolithic times, and embodying the sweat and muscle power of generations for whom it represented a source of material wellbeing and – according to season and economic conditions – alternatively a harsh taskmaster and deeply-rewarding mistress. For men living on the land and by the land, the countryside was forever dynamic, the pace of life being governed by the seasons and the urgent and fluctuating demands of agrarian practice. The art and craft of farming (peripherally tempered in the twentieth century by science) was always, and will always remain, subject to the fickle exigencies of nature, so that dynamic flexibility was a *sine qua non* of success.

Yet to external observers; Georgian poets, green primitive followers of Payne Knight's Picturesque meanderings, or pre-Raphaelites like Ruskin and

William Morris and the rest, the countryside was a haven of tranquil timelessness wherein a contented peasantry pursued its quotidian life in meditative communion with soil and season. To many, this romantic vision carried transcendental qualities whereby the contemplation of nature offered insight into God's purpose. Man living in accord with his natural environment would come to understand the Creator's workings, a notion secularised by modern ecocentrics. This pastoral illusion, of course, conveniently ignored the harsh realities of rural life and remained blithely indifferent both to the depths of social change and the increasingly profound tension between the rural classes which threatened the very fabric of the countryside after the Napoleonic Wars. Nevertheless, the myth persisted and gained further currency as industrialisation and urban development in the later nineteenth century gave rise to a tide of nostalgic 'golden age' cravings. If the smug late Victorian urban tradesman clung tenaciously to the belief that the village chawbacon was in many ways his intellectual inferior, ruralist writers from a variety of disciplines attempted to raise the rural condition almost to a level of spirituality. The early pastoral novels of Hardy, peopled throughout with contented bumpkins treated with amused affection by their betters, helped to perpetuate the myth with the same intensity as the historian G.M. Trevelyan, his majesterial prose conveying seductive images of arcadian bliss. Meanwhile, a variety of early twentieth century novelists of severely restricted talents fished happily and profitably in these oleaginous depths. Mary Webb, for example, whose rural novels exalted the landscape of Shropshire to a semi-mystical state, was rescued from obscurity by the support of Stanley Baldwin, and her *Precious Bane*, (1924) passed through 5 issues in 1928 alone.<sup>2</sup> The Prime Minister himself, (who, significantly, numbered the Pre-Raphaelites Edward Poynter and Sir Edward Burne-Jones among his kinsmen) enjoyed playing up to his carefully-crafted image of the quiet country squire, and elaborated his own rural world-view in *On England* (1926).<sup>3</sup> Here, once again, was the 'olde England' of the sluggish river and drowsy village; a bulwark against the ravages of urbanism and industrialisation which, to Baldwin, were merely passing ephemera of little significance in the great order of things. The countryside was eternal, shaped in an unbreakable mould; cricket would always be played on the village green, the umpire's word would always be final and, to paraphrase a later Prime Minister (not entirely lacking in Baldwinian characteristics) warm beer would be drunk as the English sun went down. Thus was 'forever England' firmly implanted in the middle-class psyche of the inter-war years. Indeed, the *ideal* of the landscape continued to be embraced by some post-war intellectuals and reached its apotheosis in the writings of the great W.G. Hoskins, founder of English local historical studies. Hoskins' detestation of *laissez faire* economics, of 'urban theorists' and the 'robber economy' wherein natural resources were exploited regardless of consequences, led him to formulate a view of the landscape, 'confined in a past which is itself a refuge, a solace, to be cherished, with its value and artifacts preserved *against the future*.'<sup>4</sup>

As the urbanisation of Britain forged ahead at an alarming rate, with the built areas increasing by some 25 per cent between the wars, there developed the widely-articulated, if rather vague, notion that while the townscape would provide the thrust for change and the spearhead of economic progress, the countryside would remain as a sort of rural idyll, protected and nurtured by the traditional landed classes.<sup>5</sup> Yet that cherished countryside was coming ever more under threat as advertising hoardings, petrol stations and flimsily-constructed weekend bungalows vied with car dumps, shacks and *ad hoc* road development to scar and pollute the rural idyll. At the same time the depredations of the extractive industries attracted the opprobrium of those for whom they did not represent a source of income, while unplanned ribbon development stretched unsavoury tentacles into the countryside.<sup>6</sup> If ribbon development was to be brought under control by the *Town and Country Planning Act* of 1932 and *The Restriction of Ribbon Development Act* of two years later, Clough Williams Ellis could still describe the Britain of 1938 as a country 'where disorder, ugliness and inefficiency are generally accepted and tolerated both officially and privately as a matter of course'.<sup>7</sup> For all the efforts of the *Council for the Protection of Rural England*, established in 1926 primarily to protect the countryside for those who lived in it, the tide of change could not be stemmed, and to many well-heeled countryfolk, the barbarians, represented by mass urban culture, were clamouring at the gates.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the humbler members of the rural community, starved of decent water supplies, electrical power, and 'entertainment', looked forward with relish to the benefits which would accrue to the modernisation of village and farmscape. Concurrently many townspeople, some infected with dubious Germanic notions associating fresh air with good health, and others with an understandable urge to escape the consequences of urban industrial squalor, sought means to get into the countryside. Disregarding the attacks of C.E.M. Joad and his followers, who viewed the odyssey of the 'townies' to the countryside with disgust and ill-concealed contempt, factory workers, typists, housewives and counter clerks mounted their bicycles or piled into charabancs to snatch a few hours in the woods, parks and fields.<sup>9</sup> J.B. Priestley, typically forthright and realist, championed these brief migrations as part of a justifiable attack on privilege and a step forward in the process of democratisation.<sup>10</sup>

To the visitor, the farmscape itself seemed somnolent, its mid-nineteenth century dynamism throttled by the depression of the 1880s and 1890s and subsequently by abandonment to free market forces in 1921.<sup>11</sup> While steam had given way to the oil engine in the farmyard, the horse still remained the principal power unit in the fields, and farmers continued steadfastly wedded to the long-held assumption that soil fertility could only be sustained by short-term rotational systems, integrating arable and animal husbandry. The countryside, driven to dilapidation by free trade policy, bore a decrepit appearance as many farmers abandoned the relentless struggle to farm for profit, so that bracken, gorse and rushes spread inexorably; a haven for foxes and rabbits but for little

else. But to the few who burdened their minds with these problems, it was clear that geopolitical considerations would at some time in the future limit the availability of the seemingly endless supplies of cheap food from the Empire and elsewhere, in which case British farming would once again become of paramount importance. This recognition was central to the thinking of many of the pioneers of modern agricultural science and rural economy, of whom Sir Daniel Hall, C.S. Orwin and Sir George Stapledon were among the foremost. Of these the former two were preoccupied with establishing a basis for increased agricultural productivity by way of specialisation and intensification, while Stapledon proposed to do so in what today would be described as a 'sustainable' manner. Indeed, sustainability of agricultural systems had been the concern of leading Victorian farmers several generations previously, their success being based on the judicious use of a carefully-balanced blend of organic and inorganic manures. Lawes at Rothamstead and Robert Elliot of Clifton Park, Roxburghshire, meanwhile had unequivocally demonstrated the value of the long-term ley as a key element in cereal yields, in contradiction of cherished traditional notions.<sup>12</sup>

Sir George Stapledon, founder member of the British Ecological Society in 1913, and the subject of this essay, was concerned *both* with agricultural sustainability *and* with the maintenance of a vibrant and dynamic rural community. Since his writings of two generations ago encapsulate many of the current post-Shoard and post-Schumacher perceptions of sustainability, he demands our attention as a pioneer of the first rank. If the reductionist scientists and positivist economists of the thirties and forties viewed many of his visions with scepticism and shuddered at the boldness of his proposals, his interest in holism and integrated systems of thinking are totally relevant at the close of the present century. It could be argued, indeed, that a careful reading of his works should be regarded as an essential point of departure for all contemporary scientists and scholars seeking to elucidate the problems of the modern countryside.

This essay does not attempt to evaluate Stapledon's formidable contribution to ecology, the breeding of grasses or the development of techniques for the improvement of the hills and uplands, which are described both in his own works and numerous articles in the scholarly and popular press.<sup>13</sup> Put simply, Stapledon created the subject of grassland agronomy, and, together with his colleagues at the Welsh Plant Breeding Station, mastered an understanding of the breeding systems of grasses and clovers which permitted the production of the seeds that were to transform the face of farming both in Britain, New Zealand and elsewhere in the British Empire. The new seeds (be they rye grasses, cocksfoots or clovers), combined with the system of ley farming which he pioneered, provided much of the basis for the post-1939 agricultural revolution, during the first ten years of which the acreage of unproductive permanent pasture in Britain declined from 15.5 million to 7.7 million.<sup>14</sup> One can pay no greater tribute to Stapledon's work as an applied scientist than to reiterate the remark of Reginald Dorman-Smith, the wartime Minister of Agriculture, that without Stapledon's

singular contribution, the country would have been starved into submission before a single jackboot trod the English soil. But Stapledon's claim to more than a mere footnote in agricultural history lies in his passionate conviction of the fundamental importance of the rural community to both the economic and cultural *mores* of Britishness, and his visionary evocation of a countryside where productivity and spiritual values were pursued as parallel objectives. Believing that the improvement of land was a moral and aesthetic necessity, and that the chronically decaying rural slum that was Britain between the wars required urgent revitalisation, he stimulated a new climate of opinion and in so doing almost single-handedly adumbrated the principles of post-modern rural sociology. The following paragraphs address these aspects of his works.

Descendant of a long line of Devonshire shipbuilders and yeomen, Stapledon read Botany at Cambridge between 1901 and 1904 and subsequently, after a lacklustre spell in the family shipping business and a brief period on a fruit farm in Kent, returned to his *alma mater* to pursue a Diploma in Agriculture in 1908.<sup>15</sup> Thereafter he studied vegetational development in the Cotswolds as a member of staff of the Royal Agricultural College, where he observed the effects of environment on herbage growth; a useful prelude to the botanical survey of Central Wales which he undertook several years later. Wartime service with the Food Production Department preceded Stapledon's appointment as first Director of the Welsh Plant Breeding Station following its establishment in 1919 *via* the generosity of the philanthropist Lord Milford. This was the prelude to a lifelong love affair with Wales and the Welsh, and to a period of astonishing creativity for the Plant Breeding Station. Gathering about him a nucleus of talented colleagues, many of whom were later to achieve distinction in their own right, Stapledon set about the problem of the totally neglected *Graminae*, and over the next two decades the Station, applying a range of breeding techniques, produced a wide variety of productive grasses and clover cultivars. From a state of virtually zero knowledge of the breeding systems of these species, commercial supplies of S23 perennial rye grass, S100 white clover, S123 red clover and S21 cocksfoot (bred by Stapledon himself) together with numerous others, were available by the outbreak of World War II. Concurrently Stapledon mounted a full-frontal attack on the depressingly derelict state of the Welsh hills and uplands, and with his associates William Davies and Moses Griffith, established the ground-rules for all subsequent hill-land improvement. The problem of upland rejuvenation was approached on a massive scale consonant with Stapledon's impatience of detail and 'pilot experiments', and several thousands of acres in the Devil's Bridge area of Aberystwyth were demonstrably improved by ploughing, the application of lime and phosphate and reseeding with the new grasses and clovers.<sup>16</sup> The practical problems associated with these epic enterprises seemed to melt away before his robust enthusiasm and that of his colleagues in whom he inspired fierce loyalty. The Cahn Hill Improvement Scheme, named after Sir Julian Cahn who generously funded the programme,

attracted worldwide attention and was to be the model for many thousands of acres of hill-land rejuvenation elsewhere.

Inevitably the pressures of managing these heroic schemes, and overseeing both the Welsh Plant Breeding Station and the Grassland Improvement Station at Drayton in Warwickshire (to which he was appointed Director in 1939) imposed severe stress. Moreover, the demands of writing, speaking and widespread travel at home and abroad, placed considerable strain on his health, and Stapledon's mid-life was punctuated by a series of nervous breakdowns which induced him to retire from his various posts in 1945. Although plagued with deafness and a succession of illnesses, his later years were spent as a director of Dunn's Farm Seeds at Salisbury, in the careful study of poetry, philosophy and psychology, and in the enjoyment of the numerous honorary degrees bestowed upon him by universities around the world. Few men have left a greater and more indelible mark on the land surface of Britain than Sir George Stapledon. The extent of his practical and literary achievements is probably the greater for his total and absolute indifference to committee work which he viewed as the ultimate resort of the talent-starved humdrum plodder. His occupation of a professorial chair at Aberystwyth notwithstanding, he had a sublime disregard for College organisation, a distaste for scientific committees and an oblivious contempt for arcane notions of academic procedure and regulations. Hating pretence or injustice, and any education system which dulled creativity and resorted to 'spoon-feeding' he was, in all respects, an academic rebel. As at no other time in our educational history, such rebels are worthy of study today.

Despite his reservations as to the quality of scientific education during his period as an undergraduate at Cambridge, the younger Stapledon was passionately interested in the potential benefits of science to human progress. Yet his view of scientific research became increasingly ambivalent as the years passed. 'For my own part', he wrote in 1937, 'I should never have improved a yard of ground if I had been a good scientist, and if I had waited on the ultimates'.<sup>17</sup> This self-deprecating remark, written with tongue-in-cheek by a man who knew himself to be an applied scientist of the first rank, has an underlying seriousness in the sense that it hints at Stapledon's distrust of the contemporary obsession with induction at the expense of giving free and untrammelled rein to the deductive powers. This sort of obsession, he believed, produced dreary science, limited to the chasing of illusive hares, however alluring those hares may have been. Long-term planning certainly required to be underpinned by the results of inductive scientific research conducted under rigorously-controlled conditions, but *not* within rigid disciplinary boundaries by which enslavement to the scientific method led to a view of 'our imaginations as formidable enemies, rather than as trusty and reliable allies'.<sup>18</sup> For all his own painstaking and elegant studies of the biology and ecology of the *Graminae*, Stapledon was keen to promote progress rather than to forage endlessly in the pursuit of absolute truth which, in this world at least, is forever an illusion. Typical of this view was his

application of mass hybridisation techniques to the creation of S21 Cocksfoot, a procedure which rapidly yielded commercially viable seed of *acceptable* quality at the expense of complete genetic purity. He saw little purpose in spending many years in the pursuit of perfection when the material to hand, at 70 per cent purity, was far superior to other seed stocks on the market. The objective of scientific studies in agriculture, after all, was progress; progress towards sustaining the land and the farmer in a state of preparedness for any eventuality.<sup>19</sup> This would not be achieved unless studies were conducted on the widest possible foundation without being confined to particular aspects of human need or specific areas of the physical and biological sciences. Progressive and creative science, moreover, would invariably be curtailed when official bodies, University departments and fundholders refused to abandon their stolid adherence to custom and convention, so to clog the wheels of initiative. Thus would 'expediency and its twin brother compromise' retain a stranglehold on creative thought and deter the scientific thinker and dreamer from painting on a broad canvas.<sup>20</sup> To Stapledon, experimentation leavened with a sense of wonder was essentially important to the future of humankind, above all in the field of education. 'To experiment implies movement, change, endeavour; to demonstrate implies satisfaction and self-complacency and leads, and often extraordinarily quickly, to stagnation. No system of education can be satisfactory ... unless it is conducted in a spirit of adventure and of research'.<sup>21</sup> Stapledon was primarily a strategist rather than a tactician, and while he never lost his basic belief that inductive science might yield the *tactics* for progress, *strategy* could only be conceived by careful observation, deep thought, humane artistic perception and unshackled creative imagination.

Such a visionary, almost poetic viewpoint, could not survive in a society indoctrinated with the dreary nostrums of market economics. Cartels, tariff manipulation and slavish preoccupation with current costs competed with farm amalgamation and economic dogma for Stapledon's disapproval. The profit motive of itself was neither immoral nor perverse, yet, '... as a master motive it is fatal alike to individuals, communities and nations', and the growing monster of economic determinism, allied with the widespread pursuit of self-interest, threatened to overwhelm human spiritual progress.<sup>22</sup>

The somewhat hazily-defined notions of 'spiritual' or 'non-material' values were central to Stapledon's thinking and were frequently articulated in his strange work, *Disraeli and the New Age* (Faber, 1943). In this rather incoherent volume, Stapledon used Disraeli's maxims and paradoxes as vehicles for ranging over a bewildering complex of issues embracing local and regional government, a world language, quietism, statesmanship, race, and the role of the press and Church as agents of 'spiritual nourishment and instruction'. The book was rightly criticised for the hopeless impracticability of many of its proposals, yet it attracted the support of critics like H.J. Massingham and George Orwell (whose political perspectives were diametrically opposed), both of whom found



it stimulating and, above all, humane.<sup>23</sup> Orwell probably disapproved of Stapledon's critique of the Beveridge Plan which he regarded as being too narrowly conceived and insufficiently attentive to 'spiritual values', but the critic would have applauded his attacks on dictatorial government and ecclesiastical dogma, and would have commended his plea for a new post-war era where statesmanship would take precedence over politics, and individual and social development would be directed by humane motives at the expense of a preoccupation with economic concerns. As Stapledon saw it, the problem of the immediate post-war years would be one of breaking with tradition without totally severing links to the accumulated wisdom of the past. To achieve this would require a sea-change in official and public attitudes so that the intense pursuit of the 'material' would give way to what he described as a 'spiritual-material' view of life and society. But, as his critics lost no time in pointing out, beyond offering some rather trite observations on social and academic education – which few were likely to take seriously – Stapledon failed to outline precisely *how* his utopian vision would come to pass.

Nevertheless, this deep concern with 'spiritual' values runs like an unbroken skein through Stapledon's works, and becomes especially significant when he writes of nature and natural phenomena. That 'vital, living and essentially individual part of each and every man', could only be truly realised by the quiet contemplation of the non-human elements of natural creation, since a man can never be 'balanced, satisfied or wise', if he dwells wholly in an environment which is the product of his own mental processes.<sup>24</sup> The total environment needed to cater for both the sophisticated and primitive aspects of human nature, otherwise 'we as a species or as a race must either perish ingloriously or become completely perverted'.<sup>25</sup> Such views, he was at pains to point out, did not constitute a clarion call for a return to primitivism, but were merely an assertion of the need to become attuned once again to what he conceived as the ultimate realities; the rhythm and sounds of nature.<sup>26</sup> Whether he was discussing the rehabilitation of neglected land, the revival of rural crafts ('bulwarks against the growth of a stultifying standardisation'), the effects of U.K. food policy on the economies of poorer Imperial countries, or the conservation of farmers (in whose craft was enshrined the true 'spiritual' realities), he returned constantly to this theme.<sup>27</sup> Stapledon saw the land as something intangibly yet profoundly engrained in the very essence of the English psyche. This being the case, a central feature of agricultural policy had to be that of improving the land to produce *fresh* food in the interests of national material well-being and, of equal importance, of ensuring that as many urban folk as possible enjoyed access to the countryside, thereby 'to draw great breaths of inspiration from the simple realities of the country ... and from the men and women who dwell and toil in the rural areas'.<sup>28</sup> The growing numbers of urban visitors to the countryside, to whom Stapledon referred as 'pilgrims', required every encouragement from country dwellers. Looking forward to an era of peace, shorter working hours and ample disposable

income, he wrote with some prescience in 1935; 'The pilgrims possibly of even 1975, but I think almost certainly of 1999, will have time in which to enjoy the country and money to spend in the country ... to prepare is to invite, and to invite with sufficient tenacity and assurance is to succeed'.<sup>29</sup>

During the course of the Mond Lecture, given at the University of Manchester in December, 1937, Stapledon advanced the argument that the culture of a nation was reflected in (if not an outcome of) the manner in which it used and treated its land surface.<sup>30</sup> The contemporary desecration of rural England, ninety thousand acres of which was lost to building and construction in 1938-1939 alone, he viewed with horror as the wilful creation of a disequilibrium between man and his environment; a disequilibrium born largely of the perverted application of a flawed economic doctrine. As country people, starved of employment, amenities and facilities, streamed into the towns, their derelict cottages were converted into weekend homes for wealthy townspeople, so that the urban-rural balance became fundamentally destabilised.<sup>31</sup> These developments threatened the very roots of the moral life of the nation. If there was a ray of hope in the shape of the Scott Report, to which he gave a cautious welcome, the only way to quench the rural haemorrhage and restore the equilibrium was to regenerate and revitalise the moribund agricultural industry. Those interested in the preservation of rural England, he declared in Warwickshire in 1942, should fight first and foremost for a fair deal for agriculture, an industry neglected and ignored by a generation of politicians and policymakers dominated by the urban interest.<sup>32</sup>

As he sallied forth from Aberystwyth on his many travels around the farmscape of Britain, Stapledon became interested in the plight of the hills and uplands which he regarded as the treasurehouse of the rural virtues; of sturdy independence, self-sufficiency and hardiness. Here was a vital gene pool of both natural and human material whose qualities, if carefully nurtured, could be used to good effect to sustain and invigorate the farming industry and, for that matter, the urban population. But like much of the rest of rural Britain in the inter-war period, the uplands were in a depressingly moribund state, their drier slopes infested with dreary swathes of bracken and gorse, while impeded drainage and neglect had enabled the insidious spread of rush and bog elsewhere. Depopulation, vestigial social amenities, and woefully inadequate farmhouses and buildings crumbling against a seemingly hopeless economic outlook, had spawned a landscape of desolation 'which saddened our eyes and outraged our sense of propriety'.<sup>33</sup> Stapledon believed that by the application of the mould-breaking studies of hill-land improvement pioneered at the Welsh Plant Breeding Station, which found their apotheosis in the Cahn Hill Scheme, much could be done to relieve the situation. Indeed he was enabled, with the collaboration of farmers throughout Wales, to effect the rejuvenation of many thousands of acres during the war years, so to establish the framework of the large-scale programme of post-war improvement. But Stapledon's broader vision, with its almost poetic

grandeur, was not immediately realised although, of course, it has been reclaimed by rural economists of more recent years many of whom appear unacquainted with his writings.

His vision embraced nothing less than the total social, economic, agricultural and aesthetic restoration of the British hills and uplands. Against a background of land improvement and enhanced agricultural prosperity along with the provision of pure water supplies, rural infrastructure would be progressively upgraded. Little escaped Stapledon's detailed attention. Schools, village halls, decent roads and rural bus services, facilities for tourists and ramblers, amenities for the indigenous population, judicious afforestation; all would flow from the re-creation of a thriving and sustainable agricultural base which would provide just cause for people to remain in the upland districts.<sup>34</sup> While the National Trust would prove essentially a passive owner, over-concerned with the fossilisation of natural beauty, Stapledon's plans would, he believed, encompass *natural conservation within a dynamic physical and social environment*. Immediate action was necessary for the simple reason that '... rural Britain is bleeding to death because nowhere on a sufficient scale will anybody do that essential 'something' that lies between doing precisely nothing (i.e. the National Trust) and the wrong thing too thoroughly' (i.e. unplanned development or afforestation).<sup>35</sup>

Assailed on all sides by economist critics whose limited imaginative faculties precluded them from understanding that Herculean enterprises of this sort demanded consideration regardless of expense, Stapledon remained undeterred. The cost of upland rural regeneration, of course, would be vast, possibly requiring some 20 years to recoup. Equally, the cost of doing *nothing* would be the total loss of a community with all the concomitant cultural, social and human consequences. Stapledon fully realised that the financial burden would overwhelm the resources of local authorities, most of which, in any case, had failed historically to harmonise local needs with local economies and traditions. Accordingly he proposed, despite his essentially right wing political standpoint, that so formidable was the problem it could only be resolved through State ownership with authority delegated to regional boards. The relatively small number of landholders in the uplands, he thought would probably welcome State ownership in return for massive infrastructural improvement, besides which it would eventually be possible to re-establish owner-occupation once the programme of rejuvenation was complete. For the moment, the relevant sections of the various official bodies with interests in the land, including the Ministry of Agriculture, the Air Ministry, the War Office, the Board of Trade and the Forestry Commission, would be brought under the aegis of central state authority, *The Ministry of Lands*. This organisation would be responsible for national policy and for ensuring that all aspects of land use planning, from house building and road development *via* land improvement to afforestation and the provision of rural amenities, were approached with a view to obtaining the maximum possible benefit to the taxpayer.<sup>36</sup> Standardisation would be avoided and local

variety maintained by devolving authority to appointed regional bodies comprising agriculturists, foresters, sociologists, architects, engineers, surveyors and other appropriate professionals, who would consider the development of regions and localities according to topography, demography and local needs, but always with a view of the ultimate *national* interest. It was vital, above all, for man to exert his will on rural Britain *without* interfering with her natural beauty and harmony, her tones and tenses, thereby to avoid ‘crimes against good taste’.<sup>37</sup> As always, the farmer would be a central player in this monumental drama. The aesthetics of the uplands, in particular, would be relieved of the numbing monotony of *Nardus* and *Molinia* as the range of colours and shapes was widened by farm improvement measures, and as infinitely varying hues of green accentuated the sombre shades of hills, throwing their outlines into stronger relief. The colour and *chiaroscuro* of modern farming was exciting, dramatic and satisfying, and to the imaginative could do nothing but enhance environmental variety. Writing in 1944 as the war was drawing to a close and a great deal of hill land had already been improved, Stapledon remarked that, ‘... man may bespoil scenery by the buildings he erects, by huddling together in shapeless masses the ill-conceived offspring of mortar, bricks and concrete, but never by pursuing in a tidy and orderly manner the growing of distinctive and appropriate crops on soils that are crop-worthy’.<sup>38</sup> The *real* architects of improvement, he wrote after peace had been declared, were the farmers themselves, whose heroic efforts had ‘steered our rudderless and becalmed agriculture through the doldrums’.<sup>39</sup> Relieved of the fear of free market forces by the 1947 *Agriculture Act*, farmers would approach the post-war years with a growing feeling of confidence and as state assistance flowed into the hills and uplands, land improvement along Stapledonian lines would become the hallmark of subsequent decades.<sup>40</sup> If some might argue in the 1990s for the preservation of semi-natural hill land of low productivity, few would refute the contention that the best interests of the conservation of *human* communities in the uplands have been served by the ultimate application of the principles so vigorously championed by Sir George Stapledon in the thirties and forties.

It is a matter of debate whether the natural environment has been depleted or enriched by extensive post-war upland improvement along the lines proposed by Stapledon and his disciples. Unquestionably, the archeological record has suffered immeasurable losses as a result of land renovation in both upland and lowland locations, although it is in many ways understandable that in the agro-economic environment of the 1940s and 1950s, the preservation of a Neolithic orthostat or Bronze Age field system would seem of minor importance compared with the compelling imperative of producing food. While Stapledon loved nature and all her works, he rarely commented in detail upon individual species preservation. He may have believed (and, I suspect, with some justification) that the conversion of swathes of bracken and sodden hillside morasses to productive pasture would effectively broaden the range of wildlife habitats. After all, there remained, and continue to remain, many thousands of acres of the former habitats

throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. At present, the acreage of upland Britain subject to the pernicious ravages of bracken is increasing, while the spread of rushes on lowland pastures consequent on the reduction in grant aid to farmers for drainage purposes is obvious to even the most casual of observers. If, therefore, hill-land improvement ushered in a decline in the range of wildlife species, we may look forward to recovery in the years ahead. In any event, the present author would contend that an observant individual with a basic knowledge of natural history would today encounter as many, if not more wildlife species during the course of a day's walk in the Welsh uplands as he would have done in the 1930s. Students of ornithology and field botany might care to test this somewhat tendentious observation – a simple enough task given the wide range of published species lists in natural histories of the 'thirties and 'forties. A study of this sort would provide an interesting contribution to the debate as to whether or not Stapledon's belief that the conversion of large acreages of rough grazing to rye grass/clover dominated pastures in the interests of the maintenance of human and domestic livestock communities was inconsistent with long-term ecological considerations.

Oliver Rackham has rightly lamented the decline of semi-natural meadow and pasture throughout much of Britain at the hands of improving agriculture, and in drawing attention to a variety of management practices prejudicial to older herbage species, has emphasised the value attributed to mixed species grasslands by contemporary Alpine farmers. If his argument that the 'unimproved' landscape of the 1940s was 'richer in beauty, wildlife and meaning' than that of the 1990s strikes a chord in today's progressively ecocentric climate of opinion, it would have struck a rather more hollow note in the sparsely populated districts of upland Wales in the inter-war years.<sup>41</sup> The inexorable drift of people from the countryside in the face of economic decline, inadequate housing, impoverished farming and vestigial social amenities, held forth the prospect of a semi-deserted landscape and the eventual extinction of the language and culture.<sup>42</sup> In this context it could be argued that if there were a price to be paid in terms of loss of 'natural' habitat, the very survival into the 1990s of Welsh upland communities with their distinctive traditions and culture, owes much to the vision and sagacity of Sir George Stapledon. In stark contrast to the situation in lowland Britain where post-war agricultural transformation created an 'industrialised' farmscape requiring an ever-decreasing pool of labour (which Stapledon would have deplored), the nature of the pastoral economy in the uplands precluded such dramatic change. Livestock farming in its various forms requires regular labour input throughout the year and the efforts of Stapledon, supplemented by official financial aid from the 1950s, helped stem the flow of people from rural Wales and created an environment in which farmers and their staff could look to the future with some confidence. Stapledon understood only too well the baneful effects of agriculture depression in both its physical and socio-economic manifestations. Apart from a brief respite during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the farming industry had been in a depressed condition for

most of his early and middle years, and although he would have had serious misgivings over the dramatic technological changes in post-war arable England leading to the environmentally-impoverishing culture of 'agribusiness', he would have viewed the improvement of the hills and uplands as unquestionably essential. After all, in the absence of such improvement and the political will to sustain it, the hills and their human population would ultimately have succumbed to the unwelcome embraces of bracken and scrub.

This brief contribution purports to do little more than to introduce Stapledon to those unacquainted with his remarkable if occasionally quirky, writings. Despite the technocentric and utilitarian culture prevailing in the inter and immediate post-war years, Stapledon found common cause with Whitehead, Smuts, Bergson and other close contemporaries who raised serious questions as to the fundamentals of modern science.<sup>43</sup> Contrary to the classical scientific viewpoint they argued that the world has a design and purpose and that our interpretation of that world, of 'the nature of things' as it were, must inevitably involve intuitive and metaphysical elements. This implied suspicion of inductive science was central to Stapledon's thinking, and consonant with his almost transcendentalist approach to nature and the land.<sup>44</sup> The land he viewed as the source of all good, a belief which led him down several curious eugenic byways one of which yielded the conclusion that 'pure' country stock might profitably be employed to 'improve' the English race. In this respect his rejection of urban values and many aspects of capitalism carried with it a disturbing flavour of anti-Semitism which, by implication at least, places him in the company of other inter-war proto-ecocentric intellectuals whose views, if not overtly fascist, came dangerously close to being so.<sup>45</sup> Inevitably, any man absorbed in mystical notions of soil, nature and race in the 1930s could hardly escape contact with fascist and national socialist thinking, however tangential this contact may have been. In Stapledon, a visionary of a passionate nature who championed the cause of the individual, one suspects that any sneaking admiration for aspects of fascism was essentially romantic, and that he viewed the cavortings of the Duce and his German counterparts as both vulgar and pathetic. A man of violent likes and dislikes, his distaste for unseemly fascist posturings would be expressed with the same degree of intensity as his dislike for chauffeurs, daylight saving, exam papers and conifers. Concurrently he would wax lyrical in his enthusiasm for Jane Austen, Disraeli, golf and the four-day week.

Impatient of detail, scornful of reductionist science, short-term economic thinking and intellectual inertia, he attached great value to creative imagination – of which he himself possessed a rare abundance. As far as he was concerned, the *real* creative and imaginative qualities in man could only be harnessed by close association with the land, a view which he would have shared with Crabbe, Cowper and probably William Blake. But it was a view which avoided the worst excesses of primitivism and artcraftiness so joyously pursued by the crop-circle and ley-line enthusiasts of the present day. Far from attempting to wrest the secrets of nature from her bosom by embracing a standing stone, Stapledon's

countryman absorbed his wisdom from the daily observation of tangible nature and accumulated his 'spiritual' values – of independence, self-sufficiency and concern with the longer-term – by the quiet contemplation of natural phenomena. The earth represented reality, the cradle of life and the fount of creativity, and the craft of the true farmer was the quintessence of all these. Both the farm and the landscape could ultimately only be sustained under a commitment to holism, and this commitment would only be possible through a profound understanding of nature herself and of Man's relationship to her works. Stapledon's vision of the socio-psychological virtues of what he came to call 'ruralicity' is set out in all its grandiose magnificence in the last paragraph of his masterpiece, *The Land, Now and Tomorrow*. Let it serve as a coda for this essay.

If my book only encourages further dreaming and imagining about the land, it will have more than served its purpose, for deep in the inner recesses of man's subconscious mind lies the indelible impression of the land – a heritage which, by greatly dreaming and greatly imagining, could be galvanised into a mighty power, capable of strengthening the conscious endeavours of mankind and directing them along paths leading to creative achievement in the sphere of individual happiness, personal health and social justice.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> D. Lowenthal, 'British National Identity and the English Landscape', *Rural History, Economy, Society and Culture*, 2(2), 1992, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> S. Miller, 'Urban Dreams and Rural Reality: Land and Landscape in English Culture, 1920-1945', *Rural History, Economy, Society and Culture*, 6(1), 1995, p. 90. Mary Webb (1881-1927) had little early success until Baldwin's Introduction to the 1928 edition of *Precious Bane* assured a large posthumous readership. Her various novels, including *The Golden Arrow* (1916), *Gone to Earth* (1917) and *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920) are of a highly romantic flavour and notable for their complete absence of any sense of humour. There is, however, a kind of lyrical intensity in her stark depictions of rural life and the countryside.

<sup>3</sup> Whatever his sentimental ruralist outlook, Baldwin's relations with the farming community were less than cordial.

<sup>4</sup> D. Matless, 'One Man's England: W.G. Hoskins and the English Culture of Landscape', *Rural History, Economy, Society and Culture*, 4(2), 1993, pp. 190-192.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> R.J. Moore-Colyer, 'Ironstone, People and Politics: Land Reclamation around Corby, Northants, ca. 1840-1980', *Landscape History*, 18, 1996, pp. 57-71

To the average farmer caught in the grip of profound agricultural depression, the prospect of selling land for building, regardless of aesthetic consequences, was eagerly anticipated.

<sup>7</sup> Clough Williams Ellis, *Britain and the Beast* (London, 1938), p. xv. Although much of the planning legislation of the 1930s was permissive, it lay the basis for the seminal important *Town and Country Planning Act* of 1947.

<sup>8</sup> D.N. Jeans, 'Planning and the Myth of the English Countryside in the Interwar Period', *Rural History, Economy, Society and Culture*, 1(2), 1990, p. 260.

<sup>9</sup> C.E.M. Joad, *The Untutored Townsman's Invasion of the Countryside* (London, 1946).

<sup>10</sup> J.B. Priestly, *An English Journey* (London, 1934).

<sup>11</sup> See, *inter alia*, E.H. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, VIII, 1914-1939* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 97-102; J. Brown, *Agriculture in Britain, 1870-1947* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 83-94; M. Tracy, *Government and Agriculture in Western Europe, 1880-1988*, 3rd edn. (London, 1989); E.H. Whetham, 'The Agriculture Act, 1920 and its Repeal – the "Great Betrayal"', *Ag. Hist. Rev.* 22(1), 1974, *passim*; M. Tracey, 'Fifty Years of Agricultural Policy', *J. Ag. Econ.*, 29(3), 1976, *passim*; R.J. Moore-Colyer, 'Farming in Depression: Wales between the Wars, 1919-1939', *Ag. Hist. Rev.*, 46(2), 1998, pp. 177-197.

<sup>12</sup> John Sheail has shown the degree to which the drive for sustainability pre-dated post-war views by more than a century in, *inter alia*, 'Grassland Management and the development of British Ecology', *Brit. Jour. Hist. of Science*, 19, 1986, pp. 283-299; 'Elements of Sustainable Agriculture; The U.K. Experience, 1840-1940', *Ag. Hist. Rev.*, 43(2), 1995, pp. 178-192.

<sup>13</sup> Stapledon wrote, in addition to his various books, a very large number of papers and articles in the scientific and farming press. Complete lists are retained in the libraries of The Royal Society and The Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research at Aberystwyth, while a select bibliography, supplied by Stapledon himself is appended to Sir John Russell's *Biographical Memoir* of 1961.

<sup>14</sup> The early work of the Welsh Plant Breeding Station is described in R.J. Moore-Colyer, *Man's Proper Study: A History of Agricultural Science Education in Aberystwyth, 1878-1978* (Llandyssul, 1982), chapter 5.

<sup>15</sup> Full biographical details are set out in, R. Waller, *Prophet of the New Age: The Life and Thoughts of Sir George Stapledon* (London, 1962); E.J. Russell, 'Reginald George Stapledon, F.R.S., 1882-1960', *Biographical Memoirs of the Royal Society*, 7, 1961.

<sup>16</sup> Much of this land had been improved a century or more previously by Thomas Johnes of Hafod. See R.J. Moore-Colyer, *A Land of Pure Delight; Selections from the Correspondence of Thomas Johnes of Hafod, 1748-1816* (Llandyssul, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> *The Hills and Uplands of Britain: Development or Decay?* (London, Faber, 1937), pp. 105-107.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Search for Ultimate Truth' (1912), in *The Way of the Land* (London, Faber, 1943), pp. 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> *The Land, Now and Tomorrow* (London, Faber, 1935), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Make Fruitful the Land; a Policy for Agriculture*; in F. Williams (ed), *The Democratic Order*, No. 3. (London, 1941), p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> *The Land, Now and Tomorrow*, p. 300.

<sup>22</sup> *Disraeli and the New Age* (Faber, 1943), p. 163.

<sup>23</sup> Orwell in *The Observer*, Jan. 16, 1944; Massingham in *Time and Tide*, 25 March, 1944.

<sup>24</sup> *Hills and Uplands*, p. 107.

<sup>25</sup> *The Land, Now and Tomorrow*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> In contrast to what he rather obscurely termed 'the extravagances of modern physiologists and biochemists', (*Hills and Uplands*, p. 108). Holism, organic mixed husbandry and a total rejection of agricultural practices based entirely upon economic criteria were central to the idea of the Kinship in Husbandry, a body of individuals including the historian Arthur Bryant and the writers Edmund Blunden, Adrian Bell and H.J. Massingham who rejected many of the principles of agricultural 'progress' advanced by Sir David Hall, G.S. Orwin and others. Stapledon knew and corresponded with several members of the Kinship, and was a close friend of its founder Rolf Gardiner, prime mover of the Soil



Association. (The present author is currently engaged in a study of the role of H.J. Massingham in this movement, while Philip Conford has recently contributed two important articles that touch upon it: 'The Alchemy of Waste: The Impact of Asian Farming on the British Organic Movement', *Rural History, Economy, Society and Culture*, 6(1), 1995, pp. 103-114; and 'A Forum for Organic Husbandry: The *New English Weekly* and Agricultural Policy, 1939-49', *Ag. Hist. Rev.* 46(2), 1998, pp. 197-211).

<sup>27</sup> In a difficult passage with disturbingly racist undertones, he wrote of the wisdom of the countryman born of observation and a distrust of punditry. The countryman carries, '... the genes, unsullied and uncontaminated, that maintain and perpetuate our national vigour and our national characteristics', (*The Land, Now and Tomorrow*, p. 231).

<sup>28</sup> *Make Fruitful the Land*, p. 11. In emphasising the importance of fresh food, Stapledon hints at the widely-held belief that frozen, chilled and otherwise processed food products were of questionable nutritional value. Throughout the depressed years of the twenties and thirties imported meats, in particular, supplied an increasing proportion of national demand. Thus frozen and chilled meat imports provided three quarters of the meat consumed in South Wales between 1924 and 1927, while overseas supplies as a whole met 65 per cent of Britain's food demand by 1937. (R. Duncan, 'The Demand for Frozen Beef in the U.K., 1880-1940', *J. Ag. Econ.*, 12(1), 1976, p. 83; S. Moore, 'The Real "Great Betrayal"? Britain and the Canadian Cattle Crisis of 1922', *Ag. Hist. Rev.*, 41(2), 1993, pp. 156-160.

<sup>29</sup> *The Land, Now and Tomorrow*, p. 277.

<sup>30</sup> Printed in *The Way of the Land*, p. 74 et seq.

<sup>31</sup> 'Agriculture and the Countryside'; paper to the C.P.R.E., Chester, October, 1938, printed in *The Way of the Land*, p. 95ff.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Fate of Rural England'; paper to Warwickshire Rural Community Council, July, 1942; printed in *The Way of the Land*, p. 116ff. Lord Justice Scott, *Report on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas*, H.M.S.O., 1942, Cmnd. 6378.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Changing Countryside', *Welsh Review* III(4), 1944, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> All of which is set out in detail *The Hills and Uplands* and *The Land, Now and Tomorrow*.

<sup>35</sup> *The Way of the Land*, p. 85.

<sup>36</sup> 'The Nature of the Land Surface', in *The Way of the Land*, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> *The Hills and Uplands*, p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> *Welsh Review*, 1944, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> 'Achievement', in R. Duncan (ed.), *The Scythe*, 1945, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> J. Sheail, 'Sustaining the Countryside: A Welsh Post-War Perspective', *Rural History, Economy, Society and Culture*, 7(1), 1996, pp. 69-87.

<sup>41</sup> O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (Dent, 1986), p. 26, pp. 340-2

<sup>42</sup> J. Saville, *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales, 1851-1951* (London, 1957), p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge, 1926).

<sup>44</sup> To some extent this view preceded inter Gaian co-evolutionary notions. See J. Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of the Living Earth* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>45</sup> A. Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History*, (London, 1989). Like some who praised Mussolini for his skill in revitalising the Italian railway system, Stapledon rather alarmingly observed on more than one occasion that a man who could effect the draining of the Pontine Marshes, might prove an admirable European leader.