

WENDELL BERRY IN MODERN TIMES

Geoff Wells

1.

The recent article by Wendell Berry in the New York Times, written with his long-time associate Wes Jackson, on the loss of Iowa's soil under the extreme storm events increasingly generated by climate change (see my January 14 post), sent me back to his writings, and to a rediscovered pleasure, and inspiration.

There is much about Wendell Berry's work that one can place in the unique tradition of American letters that runs from Thoreau and Emerson, to John Muir and Aldo Leopold, to Annie Dillard and Barbara Kingsolver. It has deep connections to one taproot of American culture (barely visible now) that begins with the Quakers and rises through the Shakers, the Amish and the Mennonites, and the small holdings that formed the fabric of the American rural landscape to the onset of World War II. There are echoes of the more interesting economists, such as E.F.Schumacher and Amartya Sen. There are other echoes of those who have sought out simpler forms of living, such as George Borrow, W.H.Hudson, Rowena Farre and, more recently, the blazing Jay Griffiths. Certainly one can see in it the carry of the back-to-the-land movement that was one of the more powerful streams to emerge from the 1960's and early 1970's, as those flood years broke their banks. And it is developed largely in parallel with the permaculture of Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren.

But in the end, in the breadth of his interests and vision, the passion of his convictions, sustained across four decades, the cogency of his arguments, and the clarity and elegance of his writing Wendell Berry is, as he would wish to be, his own man. He stands, literally, on his own ground--Kentucky soil. His work has been built with the same authenticity, attention to craft and loving care as the homesteads he so admires. It is a work that is worth something. Its insights have never been more urgently needed than in these times, as humanity attempts to think its way through the overwhelming challenge of climate change. Wendell Berry may not have all the answers to our present predicaments, although he had remarkably clear presentiments of their probable onset, but he finds in the end the right kind of questions. As he probes, over decades, the inner spaces and far edges of his great subject--how to live sustainably--he assembles its terms of reference so comprehensively and persuasively that it is difficult to conceive of discussing this subject outside them.

His work, across four decades, is remarkably diverse and in the main highly original. It extends from the early book, "The Unsettling of America", a passionate attack on the application of the interlocking paradigms of industry, business and science to agriculture, a critique which includes, as is appropriate to a young man writing in the middle 1970's, a lacerating denunciation of modern materialism and its society; through a stream of essays, poetry and articles which encompass the conversation we have with ourselves, as a society, about the nature and purposes of our collective life. But his abiding theme is agriculture and agricultural living, and it finds, I believe, its best expression in the collection of essays entitled "The Gift of Good Land", published in 1981. These are mature essays, with incisive analysis and insight on every page, and beautifully written. The comments that follow draw centrally on this book, and all the quotations are from it.

Although he doesn't frame it in quite this way, the perennial question that occupies Wendell Berry is how to farm sustainably. It is characteristic of his insight that he understands this question as inseparable from the wider question of how to live sustainably; that is, the question of what makes up a fully human life, and how it is to be built into the life of farms and of farming communities. In the light of the current perception of a gathering crisis in global food security it is an analysis that could hardly be more relevant; no less relevant is his wider analysis of the nature of sustainable living to the challenge of climate change. Here then are some of the ways of thinking and guiding principles he has developed across the decades of a life's work.

One way of approaching Wendell Berry's thought is through his depiction of that system of farming which represents everything he is opposed to: modern agribusiness. Here, as he sees it, the products of farming are commodities which are bought and sold on the open markets, regional, national and international. The financial imperatives of those markets are therefore crucial—Wendell Berry would say, the determining—influences on farm decision-making. Farming practice becomes in fact, predominantly a business; hence 'agribusiness' rather than 'farming'. Its metrics are those of business: profitability, cash flow and return on investment. Returns on the agricultural enterprise must be maximised in order to justify the investments made by owners, as against other possible investments they might make with their money. In farming terms this means the economics of efficiency: economies of scale, in bigger farms which can justify bigger machinery, and improve productivity; specialisation (a term which is anathema to Wendell Berry, in farming as in life) through monoculture or limited livestock-grain systems (hogs and corn, for example); pushing land for maximum production of these commodities; pervasive use of artificial inputs, like chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides, which can be applied over wide areas to maintain high levels of short-term outputs; and so on. Travelling through the irrigated farming operations—cotton, alfalfa, sorghum, millet, sugar beets, and the like—around Tuscon and Phoenix, he writes:

"This is modern industrial farming in its purest form: enormous, costly fields, dependent for their productivity on large machines, fossil fuels, chemical fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides. . .and fossil water. . .The folly of this agriculture is most plainly evident in the fields that it has already been compelled to leave behind. The reasons for this abandonment are salination, caused by the rapid evaporation of the mineral-laden groundwater, and the cost of bringing groundwater to the surface, which increases prohibitively as the aquifers are pumped lower and lower. . .After the fields are abandoned, they produce only a very sparse growth of such plants as tumbleweed, cranesbill, and mustard, which cover the ground poorly. Nevertheless, the fields are then fenced and sheep are turned in to exploit their small remaining value as pasture. They are overgrazed, further exposing the ground to the winds, and allowing the dust to blow. . .As the dust blows away, the heavier particles of sand and gravel stay in place. The rain beats these into a tight seal over the surface of the ground. This is the final product of "agriculture" here. It is called "desert pavement," and it is aptly named. It is as sterile as a concrete road, and feels the same underfoot."

Contrasting industrial agriculture of this kind with the local Native American (Papago) system, he concludes:

"Because this Arizona farmland is marginal, it provides an indispensable standard by which to measure the performance of industrial agriculture. We must look at the producing fields not just in the light of their annual production, but in light of the sterile, abandoned fields lying next to them, and in light of the little Papago fields that in many centuries of use have never become sterile." (63-66)

This is an insight to which we will return, as we consider the relevance of Wendell Berry's thought to the history of Australian agriculture and to indigenous forms of making a living on the land.

Wendell Berry bluntly describes agribusiness as 'mining'. This is a term which brings into relief its mechanical, rather than biological, orientation: its willingness to treat land resources as an exhaustible, rather than renewable, resource; its preoccupation with volume of output and economies of scale, hence size of operation and machinery; and its disregard of the degraded land it leaves behind after those resources are exhausted and abandoned in the pursuit of a new resource to plunder.

He goes on to note, too, that the human dimensions of such a system are characterised by dislocation and separation. The consumers of farm products simply consume: they play no part in

producing their food; a loss of control, as well as of the pleasures of eating what you grow. More fundamentally, however, in considering the system by which under agribusiness food is produced (the terms 'produce', 'products', 'production' are emblematic of the industrial paradigm which frames agribusiness farming practice) he sees the farmer as increasingly separated from his or her land. The push for economies of scale compels the land into the particular productive form required by business imperatives, rather than supports a working relationship with the land and its organic capabilities. Farmers become consumers: their food, too, is purchased from the supermarket, not grown on their own farms. They become operators on the land, not collaborators with it. Even the knowledge they employ in agribusiness practice is largely not developed by themselves but by university, government and business researchers, in which particular factors are extracted from, and manipulated outside, the farm as it is lived and worked. Under such a system, there is little room for farmers to participate in the cumulative development of farming practice. Applying knowledge they have not been part of developing, to land they have no incentive to understand or work with, to meet demands established by markets which take no account of the way in which the commodities they trade have been produced, modern agribusiness farmers are, in Wendell Berry's analysis, literally strangers to their own land.

2.

The system of agriculture--Wendell Berry would say, pattern--proposed as the alternative to agribusiness is idiosyncratic, but persuasively argued. It is built on fundamental principles, so that the recommendations derived from them are inter-dependent and consistent. And not simply argued, but documented. Wendell Berry is at his best when he is reporting on the various agricultures he so admires: from Andean hill-farmers, to Native American farmers of the Sonoran desert, to commercial farmers re-thinking their farming practice, to the Amish of the heartland, all feeding into his own developing farming practice on 40 acres of Kentucky soil. From the interweaving of principles and practice comes, over time, practical wisdom on which alone, in his view, sustainable agriculture can be based.

A natural entry point is the question: What is the purpose of agriculture? Certainly it is not, for Wendell Berry, to make money, to generate a return for owners and investors on a land asset. At a first level, he holds, the purpose of agriculture is to grow food that is intended for eating by the people who grow it: a subsistence view. This, he argues, shifts the focus from quantity to quality. To quantity are applied the metrics of economic efficiency: to quality, the measure of good living:

"If you sell all you grow, you will want to sell as much as possible; your interest, then, is in *quantity*. If, on the other hand, you intend to eat at least a part of what you grow, you naturally want it to be as *good* as possible; your are interested, first of all, in quality; quantity, important as it is, is of secondary importance.

"Might it not be, I thought, that subsistence farming is the very definition of *good* farming--not at all the anachronism that the "agribusinessmen" and "agriscientists" would have us believe? Might it not be that eating and farming are inseparable concepts that belong together on the farm, not two distinct economic activities as we have now made them in the United States? Is not "agribusiness" the name of farming divorced from eating?" (10)

Yet Wendell Berry is acutely aware that agriculture of this kind is an indissoluble part of the wider fabric, which embraces both the natural and the human worlds. Its responsibilities follow those links, and cannot be set aside in the name of commercial profit:

"Taking our bearings from traditional wisdom and the insights of ecologists--which, so far as I can see, confirm traditional wisdom--we realise that in a country the size of the United States, and economically uniform, the smallest possible 'unit of production' is very large indeed. It

consists of all the farmland, plus all the farmers, plus all the farming communities, plus all the knowledge and the technical means of agriculture, plus all the available species of domestic plants and animals, plus the natural systems that surround farming and support it, plus the knowledge, taste, judgment, kitchen skills, etc. of all the people who buy the food. A proper solution to an agricultural problem must preserve and promote the good health of this 'unit'. Nothing less will do." (116)

The word 'health' is central. It is characteristic of Wendell Berry's view not only of agriculture but of life, of living. Health goes with satisfaction and happiness, with the full expression of human qualities and achievement; no less than with the intrinsic life expressed by animals and plants. Health is promoted by the interdependence of biological relationships, of people, plants, animals and soils. It is no accident that the etymological root of the word 'health' is the same as that of 'whole'. It is the health of the whole system that Wendell Berry seeks: the health of each element and the health of the whole.

For this reason Wendell Berry is respectful of the science of ecology, which he sees as underpinning the biophysical foundations of agriculture. Thinking like an ecologist he develops a wider ethos of agriculture. He takes from traditional communities the model of a natural, or sustainable agriculture, whose parts and workings cohere:

"The farmer has put plants and animals into a relationship of mutual dependence, and must perforce be concerned for balance or symmetry, a reciprocating connection in the pattern of the farm that is biological, not industrial, and that involves solutions to problems of fertility, soil husbandry, economics, sanitation--the whole complex of problems whose proper solutions add up to *health*: the health of the soil, of plants and animals, of farm and farmer, of farm family and farm community, all involved in the same interested, interlocking pattern--or pattern of patterns." (137)

"Once the farmer's mind, his body, and his farm are understood as a single organism, and once it is understood that the question of the endurance of this organism is a question about the sufficiency and integrity of a pattern, then the word *organic* can be usefully admitted into this series of standards. . . . An organic farm, properly speaking, is not one that uses certain methods and substances and avoids others; it is a farm whose structure is formed in imitation of the structure of a natural system; it has the integrity, the independence, and the benign dependence of an organism." (143-144)

In such a system, for example, waste products are never simply waste, but part of the natural cycles by which fertility is maintained:

"In natural or biological systems, waste does not occur. . . . But waste--so far, at least--has always been intrinsic to industrial production. There have always been unusable 'by-products'. Because industrial cycles are never complete--because there is no *return*--there are two characteristic results of industrial enterprise: exhaustion and contamination." (116-117)

Diversity is critical in these agricultures. It is in the cash-driven monocultures of modern industrial agriculture that the roots of biological ill-health lie. Good farmers have always used diversifying techniques, such as rotation, interplanting and multiple forms of farm enterprise. Balance is a word often used by Wendell Berry to describe these intra-farm relationships. Another is propriety, word which applies the principle of balance to the quantities of farming: to the size of its fields, to the density of plants and animals they are required to support, and to the energy used to elicit their growth. These are the terms in which he describes the agriculture of the Andean hill farmers, who have survived for many centuries in that immense, harsh landscape by just such principles:

"What I was thinking, then, looking down on the little fields of the Andes, was that the most interesting, crucial, difficult questions of agriculture are questions of propriety. What is the proper size for a farm for one family in a given place? What is the proper size for a field, given a particular slope, climate, soil type, and drainage? What is the appropriate crop for this field? What is the appropriate kind and scale of technology? . . . We farm, generally, on flatter land, and for us the questions have not been so obvious, so far. We have had the luxury of pretending that the questions do not exist, that there are no problems of propriety, proportion and no limits to scale." (43)

The contrast with modern industrial farming, viewed in purely agricultural terms, could not, in his view, be more striking:

"The themes of our agriculture are volume, speed, man-hour efficiency. The themes of Andean agriculture are frugality, care, security in diversity, ecological sensitivity, correctness of scale." (41)

In these traditional forms of agriculture Wendell Berry identifies a link between scale and human capabilities which he finds repeated all over the Americas, in every culture, indigenous or traditional, wherever good farming is found--the virtue of smallness, of intimate connection:

". . . people working at least a mile away in fields the size of kitchen gardens, known with the intimacy of the lifetimes not just of individuals but of families--a knowledge centuries old. . . one begins to understand how farming and farmland have survived in the Andes for so long. For those fields hold their soil on those slopes, first of all, by being little. By being little they protect themselves against erosion, but their smallness also permits attention to be focused accurately and competently on details. This is a way of farming that has obviously had to proceed by small considerations. It has to consider dirt by the handful. Every seed and stem and stone has been subjected to the consideration of touch--picked up, weighed in the hand, and laid down." (26)

All the farmers Wendell Berry respects, and whose work he describes, farm this way. They pay close attention--to all the parts of their farms and to the way in which these parts fit together. They see not only with their eyes but with their hands, with all senses, close up. Embedded in this kind of intimacy is a deeply held attitude of care, and of respect, for all the living and non-living parts of the farm. For the native Americans farming in the austere conditions of the Sonoran desert, these attitudes are the conditions of their survival:

"In response to their meager land, the Papago developed a culture that was one of the grand human achievements. It was intricately respectful of the means of life, surpassingly careful of all the possibilities of survival. . . The Papago communities were at once austere and generous; giving and sharing were necessarily their first principles." (51)

Central to this kind of agriculture--not only in indigenous practice but in the traditional farms of rural America--is the knowledge on which it is based. It is not the knowledge of what Wendell Berry calls the 'agrispecialists': the government and university research scientists who publish and present, he notes, not to practising farmers but to their peers; and it relates not to the intricate, seamless whole that he is attempting to understand but to "the efficacy of new techniques, varieties or methods" considered each on its own. In contrast, the knowledge that underpins good farming is accumulated by human experience, over time. Its vehicle is tradition, the continuity of farming practice over centuries which achieves small improvements through trial-and-error, tethers them into the collectively held stock of knowledge and transmits them within communities and families

across generations--the true reach of craft:

"They do as they have done, as their ancestors did before them. The methods and reasons are assuredly complex--this is an agriculture of extraordinary craftsmanship and ecological intelligence--but they were worked out over a long time, long ago; learned so well, one might say, that they are forgotten. It seems to me this is probably the only kind of culture that works: thought sufficiently complex, but submerged or embodied in traditional acts." (27)

Because such an agriculture is built upon subsistence principles, it is required to be sustainable. A technique which achieves benefits for one generation at the expense of the next is inherently unacceptable. This is an agriculture of stewardship, whose success is measured by the condition of the stock of natural capital it passes on:

"This ancient way of farming is, above all, durable. Within the terms of the land and climate and of the Papago culture, it has no foreseeable end. It is an agriculture extremely conservative of its own means and possibilities. It preserves and increases the land's productivity. Fertility is built up locally, not imported. Only the annual surplus of water is used. There is little or no salination--an extremely serious problem in fields irrigated by groundwater. Pests and diseases are kept in check by the aridity of the climate, by the wide dispersal of fields within the region and of plants within the fields. . . There is good evidence that the traditional Indian agricultures of the Southwest increase, rather than diminish, the biological productivity and the diversity of plant and animal species." (55-56)

Wendell Berry observes that the history of settlement in the United States (and, we might add, Australia) reveals an altogether different attitude, born of a perception was formed elsewhere, in Europe. Yet the standards by which that use of the land is to be judged are the same as for indigenous and traditional farming, and are framed in terms of sustainability and stewardship:

"The condition of the land as it was when we came to it is the only possible measure of our history. . . As we felled and burned the forests, so we burned, plowed, and overgrazed the prairies. We came with visions, but not with sight. We did not see or understand where we were or what was there, but destroyed what was there for the sake of what we desired. And the desire was always native to the place we left behind. . .

"The forest could not survive because we did not see it; we saw cleared fields. The prairies could not survive because in their place we saw cornfields and pastures sowed to the cool-season grasses of the Old World. . .

"To see and respect what is there is the first duty of stewardship." (82-83)

In the end, Wendell Berry affirms, it is a matter of what kind of life you want to live, individually and collectively: what desires need to be fulfilled in order to deliver real satisfaction, and what do not--where the limits are; whether you apply the notions of growth and conspicuous consumption, or those of thrift, care, respect, industry (all favourite Wendell Berry words); whether you hold yourself, as a farmer, to be beholden to international markets, or to the local, human scale of your own community:

"I am worried about the decline of farming communities of all kinds, because I think that among the practical consequences of that decline will be hunger. . . The values of our present economy do indeed suggest that it is better to perish with some ostentation of fashion and expense than to survive by modest competence, thrift and industry. . . The economy of extravagance has overthrown the economies of thrift. Local cultures and agricultures such as

those of the Hopi and the Papago do not deserve to survive for their picturesque trappings or their interest as artefacts; they deserve to survive--and to be emulated--because they embody the principles of thrift and care that are indispensable to the survival of human beings." (74)

Speaking as a practical farmer, who uses ploughs and shovels and mowers and tractors and (in his case) horses, farming emerges not as a physical, or even a biological, but a moral profession:

"We are talking about organic *artifacts*, organic only by imitation or analogy. Our ability to make such artifacts depends on virtues that are specifically human: accurate memory, observation, insight, imagination, inventiveness, reverence, devotion, fidelity, restraint. Restraint--for us, now--above all: the ability to accept and live within limits; to resist changes that are merely novel or fashionable; to resist greed and pride; to resist the temptation to "solve" problems by ignoring them, accepting them as "trade-offs," or bequeathing them to posterity. A good solution then, must be in harmony with good character, cultural value, and moral law." (145)

3.

Although Wendell Berry was writing here some decades ago, the central principles he establishes have continued to be his main themes in more or less unaltered form. At the time of writing global warming was just beginning to be spoken of in public scientific discourse. Wendell Berry seems to have had early intuitions of the dangers. He is deeply suspicious of fossil fuels because of the local pollution effects of power plants and because (more crucially for him) they power industrial agriculture and embed dependence. Global warming as such wasn't, however, part of his critique. Even his recent New York Times article on the extreme storm events induced by climate change focused on a long-established concern of his--which sits, one might say, at the practical and emotional heart of his vision: the loss of soil. Nevertheless, the principles of sustainable farming and living as they have evolved in his writing over forty years can offer guidance to what is rapidly emerging, surely, as the age of climate change.

We can begin with the question of what constitutes sustainability. There is no term more widely used and less defined in modern public discourse. We have a general sense of its being connected to an open-ended future; to a dynamic stability, in which extraction and renewal, or recharge, are in balance; to the limits of natural resource use required to secure that stability; and to a wider system in which both natural and human elements are included.

But what, exactly, is to be sustained? Is it some general measure of productivity in which technology and human capital can substitute for natural capital in preserving the level of some output? Is it the preservation of natural capital alone, and if so of what is it comprised? Does it extend to social and cultural capital? And is capital the right metaphor anyway (capital for what?). Is it better defined in terms of environmental services (but again, services for what?). How far out does the analysis run?--to our children and grandchildren? To the seven generations of Native American lore? To the timeless present, embracing past and future, of the Australian Aboriginal people? Do notions of stewardship capture such visions? And what about the ethical questions in considering the rights of the present (particularly poor) generation against future generations? And so on. The questions which centre on the idea of sustainability reach to most of the questions with which we, as a world civilisation, are engaged.

Here I think Wendell Berry's principle of 'health' in agriculture has much to offer. Health is not primarily a quantitative measure, although we do recognise degrees of health. Rather, it is a state, generated by a system whose parts and relationships are working to their full capability. The state of health is that whole which more than the sum of the parts, which are themselves healthy (and of which, as systems in their own right, the small parts are healthy, both individually and in their relationships to other smaller parts.) The system Wendell Berry has in mind spans land, soil, communities, knowledge, species and natural systems, in place. As he remarks, "nothing less will

do": inclusion is non-negotiable. His principle is certainly prescriptive: it goes beyond what is there (the basis of most sustainability definitions) to what should be there, if health in this sense is to be attained. And in this normative thrust it becomes a matter of "moral law": ethical imperatives of the kind which deep ecologists argue apply both to people and their communities and to the animals, plants--Wendell Berry would add, land, landscapes and soil--with which they share the planet.

How is this ideal of health to be accomplished, as a practical matter? Clearly the system of agriculture defined by Wendell Berry is of immense scope and complexity. It consists of innumerable elements and their exponentially expanding relationships. The behaviour of these elements in those relationships is governed by the full--and ultimately unknowable--panoply of natural laws. The inclusion of farmers and their communities extends that complexity to the extraordinary richness of individual and collective human life and ways of living. It is self-evidently impossible to stand in some way outside such a system and design it to deliver the holistic outcome of what Wendell Berry defines as 'health'. Is it, then, an intellectual indulgence incapable of implementation?

The challenge is a serious one, and, as one might expect, Wendell Berry doesn't shy away from it. Part of the answer he finds in traditional farming practice. In the innumerable trials that constitute farming practice, over generations; in the patient gathering of information and insight across uncountable seasons; in the intimacy of these farmers with their land; in the close interdependency of social life and farming life; in the sober appreciation of risk, to self, others and their environment, and the just valuation of reward; in the codification and transmission of this accumulated knowledge and experience from one generation to the next; in all this Wendell Berry finds the practical wisdom needed to build the health of agriculture as he has defined it. It is certain not, in his view, found exclusively through 'agriscience', where the objects of research are isolated from the complexities that form its real-world substrate, the farm with which the farmer works every day. In traditional farming the knowledge is found and shared in the collective working enterprise of men and woman (and children) in the past, the present and the future.

Underpinning all this is a particular way of thinking about the nature and purposes of life, and about ways of making a living in farming. It values, first, quality over quantity; or, to put in reverse, will not appeal to quantity as the primary, often sole, measure of agricultural success. How produce is grown; the side-effects of that process; what it leaves behind; these are as important as the produce itself, across the whole natural and human landscape Wendell Berry has defined as agriculture. That quality is secured by specific virtues of thought and action: care; respect; prudence; thrift; diligence; intimacy; reflection; and the courage of honesty, with respect one's own and others' farming practice.

Fundamentally these values are connected with how one thinks about one's life and its purposes. Valuing quality over quantity, and aware of one's stewardship responsibilities, good farming brings satisfaction and fulfillment as an activity in its own right. It is work a man or a woman can be proud of, building health across the full span of agricultural life, and leaving it as a proper inheritance to future generations. Anything less is simply less; not enough; and will not do.

The central proposal of this essay is that the solution to climate change lies in the constellation of just such principles as these, applied across global societies and communities, and in international institutions. Climate change can only be effectively met by eliminating the annual emissions of greenhouse gases and by extracting and neutralising carbon-dioxide from the atmosphere. This cannot be achieved with our high carbon economies. Under current assumptions about the link between economic growth and the quality of life even a low carbon economy is likely to continue inflicting environmental damage; for example, from nuclear waste. Economic instruments, such as the Emissions Trading Scheme or a carbon tax, are manifestly inadequate, based on self-evidently false assumptions; and, in diverting precious resources, part of the problem, not the solution.

It is not technology or economic instruments we need but fearless thinking. As a global society we have no alternative but to change the way we think about the purposes of our life; about our responsibilities to others in this and future generations; and about the kind of knowledge we

want to bring to bear on how we live. Wendell Berry, as few other writers on agriculture have done, asks the critical questions, however hard they are--he is before everything else a brave writer--and suggests at least some of the answers. It is a start.