

BOOK REVIEW

“We Want Real Food”

by Graham Harvey, published by Constable in 2006, £9.99, 234 pages, ISBN-10: 1-84529-267-7; ISBN-13: 978-1-84529-267-6.

This is a blockbuster of a book. For those who care about their food (and that should include all of us) this book lays it all on the line – fact after fact of the way our food has been impoverished and adulterated over the past 60 years. Everyone should read this book – and then pressurise our politicians into doing something about the truly horrific situation.

The author (who has worked on farms and grew up in a “grow your own” environment) points out that until 1946 farming in the UK was mixed farming. In other words, the farmer grew crops and raised livestock, returning the manure to the land and using few artificial fertilisers. The returning of the manure to the land ensured that the soil was not denuded of its vital trace elements – and this method of agriculture was proven to be the best, over thousands of years. Then, in 1946, by a combination of Government and EU diktats, plus commercial pressures from the producers of artificial chemicals, everything changed. Farmers were persuaded to change to monoculture, where they specialised in growing just one crop per year or raised livestock in sheds rather than on pasture – with vast amounts of artificial fertiliser to massively increase the quantity of crops and vast amounts of herbicide/pesticide/fungicide/livestock medicines that were not necessary before. And the result? To quote “Today’s fresh produce has little in common with the nutrient-rich foods of pre-industrial societies. Years of chemical farming and soil mismanagement have robbed them of health-giving minerals and antioxidants”.

The depletion of minerals since 1946 has been dramatic and caused largely by the failure to return manure to the land. The UK Ministry of Agriculture estimated that over the period 1940 – 1991 farmland had lost 40% of its trace elements (24% of magnesium, 46% of iron, 75% of copper, etc). A dramatic example of this is the tomato – you would need to eat ten tomatoes of the 1991 variety to obtain the same amount of copper that one tomato contained in 1940 – that is why supermarket tomatoes are often tasteless waterbags. And of course the depletion of farmland goes on relentlessly, year after year.

The effects of modern farming on human health have been dramatic. For example, in 1900 Americans were the healthiest on the planet. By the late 1970s the Americans were close to the bottom of the 100 healthiest countries. One third of the British population is believed to be suffering from malnutrition.

The author is extremely meticulous in quoting the sources of the facts he throws at the reader. Scientific report after scientific report is listed, often with the page number of the quoted statistic. But this book is not a dry scientific tome. It is fluently written and most readable.

Some of the facts quoted are truly horrible. Take the example of wheat, which receives on average 2 types of weedkiller, 6 different fungicides, 4 growth hormones and 1 insecticide. Pesticides are then applied to the wheat grains in the silos. In the early 1950s wheat yields were 3 tonnes per hectare, now the figure is 8 tonnes per hectare. Progress? The author comments “Industrial agriculture is designed to produce large amounts of second-rate foods. It is impossible for traditional farmers to compete. Wheat growers no longer grow a food: they are producing a raw material for an industrial manufacturing operation. They must squeeze ever more production from their overworked soils.”

Of course, pesticides from the crops leak into drinking water. Water companies in the UK spend £120M per year removing pesticides. But they don’t remove them all – just enough to comply with legal limits. Thus, if you want to live on bread and water, be warned!

This book is dynamite. It should be required reading for every MP so that our legislators can do something about the situation. It is a fascinating read. Once you have read it you will probably rush out, buy some seeds and start growing your own in your garden or on an allotment. Buy the book, grow your own, change your life!

MIKE MASON