



# Why did farming go wrong?



**Rooted:  
Stories of Life,  
Land and  
a Farming  
Revolution**  
**Sarah  
Langford**  
(Viking, £16.99)

**M**Y grandfather, who served 50 years down on the farm, cultivated a number of aphorisms about agriculture. I distinctly remember one: ‘It’s the Devil’s own job.’ He meant that the work was infernally hard. Poppop would have been surprised by the twist that George Monbiot, the well-known exponent of rewilding, has given to his *bon mot* concerning Lucifer and farming. Mr Monbiot considers farming ‘the most destructive force ever to have been unleashed by humans’. In his opinion farmers are quite literally doing the Devil’s work by bringing about the Apocalypse.

Such demonisation of farming by ultra-rewilders is only one of the many woes modern farmers face, as Sarah Langford elucidates in her excellent, immensely readable book. A former barrister, the author of the bestseller *In Your Defence*, she has uprooted from London to the Suffolk sticks and a small farm owned by her in-laws (Lord and Lady Deben). *Rooted* is in part a personal journey back into farming, which was her grandparents’ occupation, and in part a ‘state-of-the-agricultural-nation’ survey. It works on both levels, not least because it has the clarity of argument one would expect, and the empathy one would hope, from a lawyer.

Yes, farmers do like to moan—the weather is always wrong—but present problems in agriculture exist in a bewildering variety that my grandfather could not have conceived in his worst nightmare. There is the form-filling; this might seem trivial,



Sarah Langford journeys back to her roots and offers a state-of-the-nation assessment of farming

but, as Miss Langford discovers on applying for Countryside Stewardship, the form is 132 pages long. The supermarket will reject one-third of your carrots because they fail the beauty test of long and straight. (It’s all red tape and rules, modern agriculture.)

‘As we binge eat, the use of “icides” is causing deterioration of the soil’

Don’t even mention the price of land, which has gone through the barn roof—how does one even start in agriculture these days? Then, the real killer: the dearth of money. Why, really, would anyone get up at 4am to milk cows to lose 2p a pint? *Rooted* is not only the author’s story; she tells the tales of other farmers, too, such as Rebecca and Stuart, whose pig farm suffered serial

disease, then a tragedy in which 350 pigs died of CO<sub>2</sub> poisoning, and a dream died.

Why has farming gone so badly wrong? The author’s chief culprit is the intensification of agriculture urged by the post-war EEC and national governments. Her uncle, the conventionally minded Charlie Flindt (a big noise in farming), is keen to point out that industrialised agriculture has produced the goods. Farmers have done what was asked, big time. But is cheap food a success, she wonders?

About one-third of British farms make no money. Britons now spend about 10% of household income on food, compared with 33% in the 1950s, but we are suffering an obesity epidemic as a result. If you devalue food, do you not devalue farmers? As we binge eat, the widespread use of agricultural ‘icides’ is causing the deterioration of the soil and the loss of Nature in the fields. ‘Farmland birds,’ she observes, ‘have declined more sharply than birds in any other kind of habitat, their populations plummeting by over half in just

30 years.’ The agrichemicals are also losing their efficacy, with farmers having to ‘hand-rogue’ the weed black wheat, exactly as in medieval times.

The field of books on current farming is crowded, and Miss Langford’s critiques of agribusiness will be familiar to readers of my books and those of James Rebanks. Where *Rooted* ploughs its own, shining furrow is in its humanity, the cost to farm folk of conventional agriculture, but also the gathered, inspirational stories of farmers trying to do better and greener.

After losing their pigs, Rebecca and Stuart made a success of farm-gate unpasteurised milk from Jersey cows. Miss Langford herself has converted her farm to organic and her sense of emancipation in producing a corn crop ‘grown with nothing but sun and rain’ is tangible. To me, alternative agriculture, invariably filed as ‘regenerative’, looks very much like the traditional mixed farming of my grandfather. Perhaps it’s back to our roots down on the farm, for all of us.

John Lewis-Stempel



**Eden's Keepers: The Lives and Gardens of Humphrey Waterfield and Nancy Tennant**

**Sarah Barclay** (Clearview, £25)

**A**T its heart, this is the touching story of how and why two people spent several decades transforming an unloved three-acre dumping ground into what Lanning Roper would later describe in *COUNTRY LIFE* (May 25, 1961) as 'the lesser known, but truly remarkable British landscaped garden'.

Not only was Hill Pasture in Essex an unlikely site, but they were an unlikely couple. Nancy Tennant was a descendent of Charles Tennant, a crofter, who, in the late 18th century, transformed the Glasgow linen industry—and his fortunes—by devising a revolutionary bleaching technique. Born in 1897, Nancy was brought up in Ugley, Essex, and, through her work with the Women's Institute, promoted choral music as a route to female empowerment.

Humphrey Waterfield, 11 years her junior, was as academically brilliant as he was creative, achieving the highest history grade in his year at Oxford before studying at both the Ruskin and the Slade. His well-heeled parents, Barbara and Derick, lived an elegant, if

dreary existence in Le Clos de Peyronnet in Menton on the French Riviera, where his mother's fixation with health required guests to gargle antiseptic on arrival.

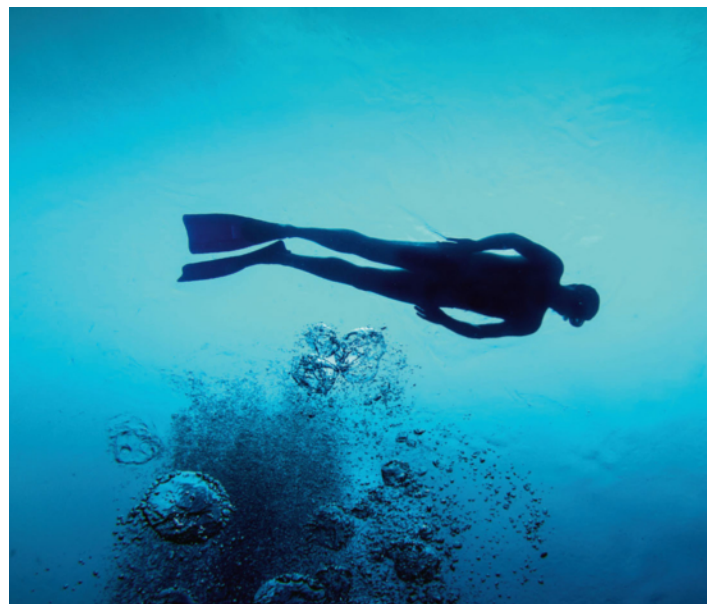
Hill Pasture in Broxton, near Nancy's family home, was the garden she and Humphrey created together on a plot he bought after making it clear that they would never marry. Instead, they resolved to build a lifelong friendship that, far from being a compromise, turned out to be arguably more valuable and long lived than many marriages.

The garden was a labour of love, in both senses of the word, and it consumed them both, more than compensating for what the relationship appeared to lack. Humphrey never drew plans; instead, according to Nancy, he would 'stride about, sticking canes in here and pulling them out there', or ask her to stand with a feather duster strapped to a broom, indicating the height of a tree.

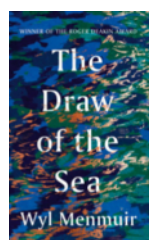
One of the many refreshing characteristics of this beautifully written and constructed account of their relationship is the author's decision not to speculate. Questions of whether it was ever consummated, whether Humphrey was homosexual and whether he was a substitute for Bunny, the beloved brother Nancy lost in the First World War, are all left for the reader to ponder. *GK*



**Lifelong friendship: Nancy Tennant and Humphrey Waterfield**



**Free-diving 'mermaids' experience the irresistible pull of the ocean**



**The Draw of the Sea**  
**Wyl Menmuir**  
(Aurum, £16.99)

**F**EW people are immune to the pull of the sea, whether it be the big waves of north Devon, the Shipping Forecast or Blackpool rock, and many, as the author soberingly observes, have died in it. Wyl Menmuir lives with the sound of the waves off Cornwall's Atlantic coast in the same way that others live with traffic. He immerses himself in them every day, 'to swim, surf, bodysurf, sail, paddle or splash', to mull over book plots—his Booker-listed novel, *The Many* (2016), was set in a fishing village—and to 'process happiness and grief'.

In the winter of 2011, after the stillbirth of his son, the family rushed for solace to Cornwall, where, immune to the curiosity of walkers, Mr Menmuir stripped to his shorts and stood chest-deep in wind-whipped, freezing water, comforted 'by the sea's great indifference'.

Before anyone groans at another 'I've found Nature' memoir, it's not really about Mr Menmuir, but about people whose lives are bound to the sea. He meets

a group of free divers, some of whom refer to themselves, without batting an eyelid, as 'mermaids', and passionate members of Surfers Against Sewage (don't read this bit when eating). He discovers the coded world of dedicated 'wreckers', plus cowrie collectors, a 'sand artist' and the displaced Icelandic walrus that threatened to sink boats by heaving itself onto them.

One of the best chapters is about amateur, but hugely knowledgeable marine biologists Heather and Richard, whose idea of bliss is to meet up on the beach with their sandwiches and exchange rock-pooling 'gossip', for instance about the changing of the Latin name of a sea snail: the 'gentle, beautiful geekery' reminds the author of the BBC series *Detectorists*.

The catalyst for Richard was the catastrophic oil spill off the Scillies in 1967—he was on his honeymoon; he's carried out a thrice-yearly survey of marine life there ever since. Heather is a local. 'It's the otherness of it,' she explains, describing barnacles as James Bond villains in their lairs. 'I can get excited about things I've seen a million times.' This tenderly written book won the Roger Deakin award (for landscape writing)—and justifiably so. *KG*