

Images of Conflict in Agricultural Periodicals 1775 to 2005

Ever since human beings first put pen to paper, they have produced treatises on agriculture and animal husbandry. Originally handwritten and with a limited circulation, the advent of printing quickly made them available to a much wider audience. Written works have a tone which reflects the underlying values of the author and his culture; the purpose of this article is to look briefly at this aspect of some modern agricultural periodicals compared with one eighteenth century textbook (written at a time of unprecedented population growth and demand for food).

Modern Australian agricultural periodicals rely heavily on the language of conflict; 'Winning the War on Weeds' is a recent headline that would not cause any raised eyebrows (and the weapons in this war were clearly agricultural chemicals); farmers *battle* and *fight*, they *eradicate*, *eliminate* and *control* weeds using products that have names like *Vanquish* and *Conqueror*, and they *combat* drought and other natural phenomena. This language reflects an underlying view of life as a conflict, and in which it is a fait accompli there must be winners and losers; farmers battle to maximise production and to survive in a hostile environment, and devise strategies (strategy itself being part of the language of military planning) to cope with various problems. Farmers are subject to a wide range of apparently hostile forces; not only nature, but so-called 'greenies' and governments seem to be engaged in a ceaseless war against the legitimate interests of agriculture.

By contrast 'The Compleat Body of Husbandry' published in 1759 leads the reader methodically through the maintenance of dung heaps (right down to the addition of beggars' cast off rags) and the application of fertilisers and manure. "It is with pleasure that we see the farmers begin to use their reason more than their fathers did, who were carried in all things by blind custom, and consequently prevented the improvement of their art." In this 400 page work, a mere four pages are devoted to weeds (under the interesting heading of 'Hurtful Plants'), the balance to the establishment, maintenance and improvement of livestock and beneficial plants by care and cultivation. The underlying theme of improvement through nurture leaps off the page; consider the qualitative difference between the old-fashioned phrase 'animal husbandry' and modern 'livestock production'. Some of the practices the authors advocate would be quite impractical today, such as the manual transplanting of decayed lucerne plants to a better situation, but the use of human manure on the land, which is also advocated, is long overdue for implementation. They were aware of the value of blood as fertiliser (old battlefields being known for their fertility), and of the dangers of stress to fat animals "for the carelessness or ill management of the drovers, will reduce a fat ox to a very poor condition". The work contains sound ethical advice "the farmer must not grudge to supply those creatures, which will afterwards supply him".

Whilst a modern article on improved winter feed opens with the remarkable assertion that “Beef and lamb production is a business no different to running a factory”, our eighteenth century authors wrote “in our hasty way of feeding, we bring a cow calf up to the condition of beef in less than three years”. Their approach was a great deal more empathic, as they advised attention to detail and close observation, than that of the modern writer who suggests “1. increase utilization – use more of what you grow 2. increase fertilization – grow more of what you have” and so on.

War is the armed conflict that follows a breakdown in communication between two states that have become hostile towards each other because of competing interests. Once war is declared there is little room for compromise, as the most difficult stage in any war is re-opening of dialogue to negotiate a peace, and once hostilities have ceased there is the added battle of ‘winning the peace’. Warlike cultures become emotionally and economically dependant on war as a way of life. Having ‘won’ wars, they then use ever increasing amounts of force to maintain order in the conquered territories, until the invariable fate of empires is to collapse under the cost of maintaining order. These comments can be applied to many agricultural practices, with force equated to financial cost and labour.

The hypothesis of this article is that the use of the language of conflict and aggression in agricultural periodicals not only reflects a self-perception on the part of many farmers as being engaged in a struggle, but provides continual re-enforcement of that view. This encourages certain forms of behaviour; response to crises rather than avoidance of them in the first place, an emphasis on ‘facts’ rather than ideas, a lack of critical thinking and a apparent absence of self-criticism. The Land and other newspapers contain many examples of farmers criticising others, but few of farmers criticising themselves. In war, ethical and moral decisions are made at the highest level of command and usually before the conflict begins, so warlike attitudes have virtually deleted any discussion of morals and ethics from agricultural debate. This moral and ethical debate must include the treatment of animals – livestock, feral and native, as well as the treatment and management of land. Above all, the continual state of crisis and struggle prevents many farmers and graziers from adopting approaches to management that are not based on a perception of conflict with natural forces.

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