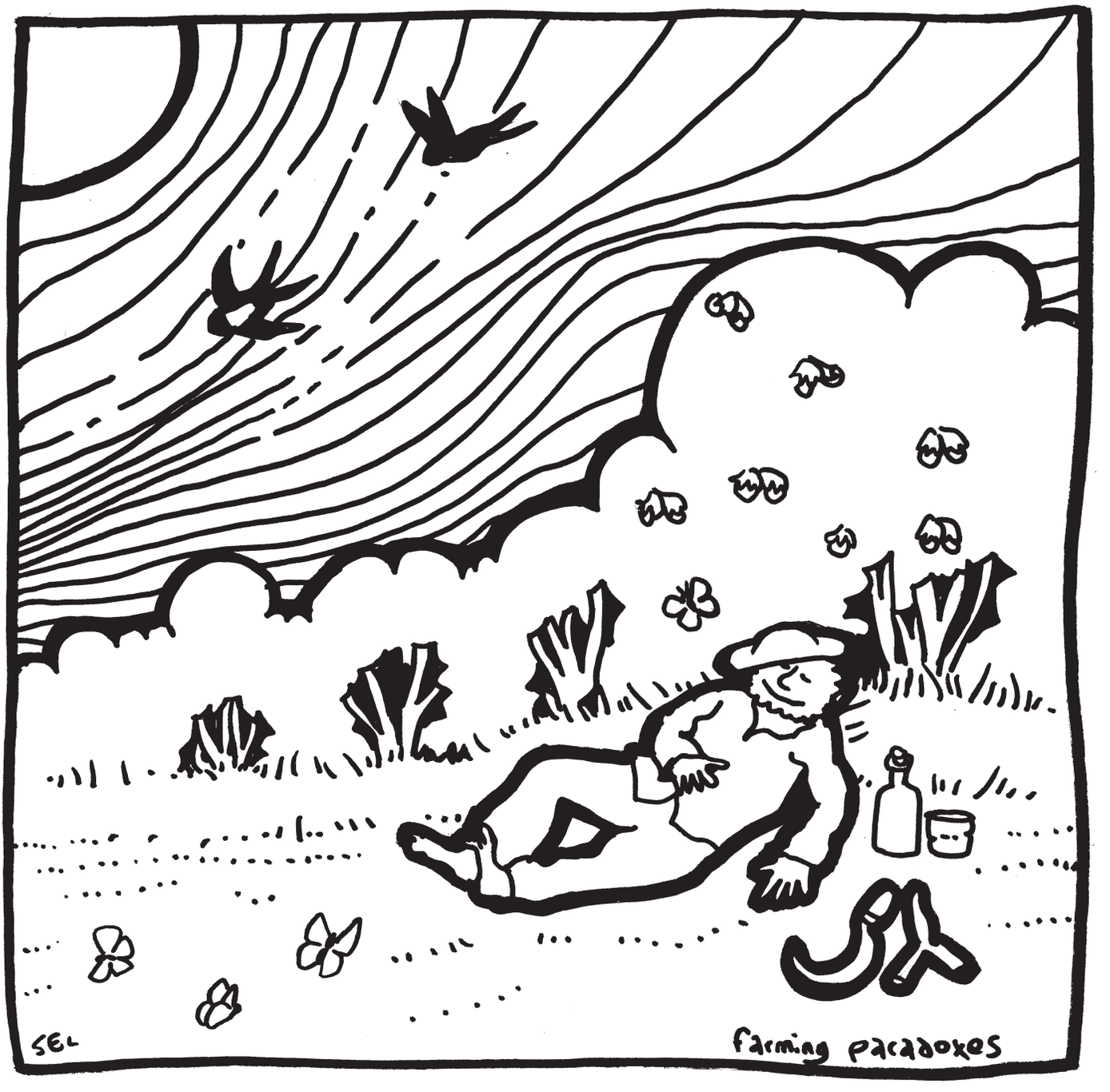

Farming Paradoxes

In today's global economy, farming does not represent a particularly large part of the total activity; according to the World Bank, it represents about 4% of global GDP. In developed countries, it has even less significance; for example, France, which until recently considered itself to be an agricultural country, now credits farming with providing less than 2% of its GDP. This explains why one hears relatively little in the news about farming, and why one is much more likely to read stories about tech companies, the banking sector, or the car industry, than about crop planting, or the annual harvest.

There is something not quite right about this low value placed on farming activity. We are all aware that if there was no food in the shops, the value of everything else would plummet, the financial system would collapse, law and order would break down, and civilisation would come to an end. But in our day-to-day lives we are happy to see most of our money being spent on a whole range of products unconnected to farming, and are aware that only a small proportion of what we spend on food actually goes to the farmers themselves; the rest is absorbed by the food processing industry, packaging and distribution companies, and supermarkets.

The Modern Perception of Farmers

Simultaneously with the economic significance of farming declining, the public perception of farms and farmers has steadily declined. Advertisers still make use of old-fashioned images of farming when promoting their products – cows in fields, carts full of hay, wild flowers, etc. – but are less and less inclined to use images of

modern farms. Generally, people raising livestock will not even allow the media access to their animal sheds for fear of adverse public reaction, and the sight of vast cereal fields devoid of trees, flowers and any form of wildlife no longer gives the food industry the image that it is looking for.

People who live in the countryside, however, cannot help but be aware of how modern farming works. The economics of the business have followed an inherent logic over the past few hundred years which has dictated that the bigger and more powerful machines that a farmer has at his or her disposal, the cheaper they can afford to sell their produce. To be used efficiently, big machines need big fields, so there is a constant pressure upon farmers to remove banks and hedges, cut down trees, to drain wetland, and to grow monocultures. This has led to loss of soil fertility, weak plants which are vulnerable to insect and fungal attack, and the emergence of superweeds – but, so far, the agrochemical industry has been able to find affordable (short term) solutions to all these problems. The trouble is, that these solutions always involve farmers having to buy bigger and more expensive machines, and, therefore, to further expand their farms if they wish to remain competitive. Even though no one wants to live close to one of these industrial-scale farms, and farmers are starting to be blamed for all forms of environmental problems, from the pollution of groundwater, to a catastrophic decline in biodiversity, it is these farms that produce the vast majority of the food that one finds in the supermarket, and upon which everyone depends.

Simple Solutions

Not only does farming occupy a subsidiary role in the national media, but when it is mentioned, any farming-related story that does make it into the news almost always presents a supposedly-simple solution to whatever problem is being highlighted; the nature of the solution being dependent upon the political or political bias of the media concerned. At one extreme, there is the old idea that we are just on the verge of a final technological breakthrough that will resolve all the current problems associated with farms; this involves genetically-modified crops that do not need chemical treatments, laboratory production of proteins, hi-tech, indoor, urban farms powered by renewable energy, and the widespread use of drones and robots. In order to counter the harm that this form of farming might do to the environment , it is argued that these technologies will be vastly more productive than current farming techniques, and that, as a result, extensive areas of marginal land, will be released from farming to be rewilded.

At the other end of the spectrum, there a range of ideas that involve turning back the clock a little, in one way or another, to return to less-intensive farming methods used in the past: smaller farms, smaller tractors, no artificial fertilisers, no chemicals, keeping animals in the open air, and growing locally, for example. However, it is acknowledged that produce from small farms, organic farms, and small, organic farms is bound to be more expensive than the super-cheap food that we have today, particularly if the farmers are to enjoy all the same modern comforts as everyone else. Suggested remedies include using legislation to outlaw intensive modern farms, so that people have no choice but to buy organic produce; giving more subsidies to organic or sustainable farms, so that their produce is more affordable; or giving monthly food vouchers to everyone, which they can only use on products certified as being environmentally-friendly, and good for the health.

More Complex Solutions

None of these simple solutions really explain why, and how, such a basic activity as farming should have gone so wrong, and without that understanding, it seems unlikely that a genuine, lasting solution to the problems associated with modern farming can be resolved. In most countries, and this is particularly true of Brittany, there is still an idea in the collective memory that there was once a time when most people were living in a rural idyll: growing their own fresh food, enjoying fresh air and pure water, surrounded by a loving community. A time when farming worked. In most people's imagination this time was not in the early twentieth century, when people in the countryside were being oppressed by high rents and taxes, and it may not have been in the century before, or the one before that. But the fine buildings and the rich tradition of high days and holidays that comes down to us from earlier times, suggests there was once an era when life in the countryside was almost like one big party for the rural community.

There is still an idea in the collective memory, that there was once a time when most people were living in a rural idyll: growing their own food, enjoying fresh air and pure water, surrounded by a loving community. ***A time when farming worked***.

Over the course of the past few hundred years, massive changes have taken place in all the key areas of human life: technologies have been adopted that have completely changed the ways that even the most basic things are done; society has changed so that people no longer live close to their extended family; the economy has changed, with money assuming a greater and greater significance in everyday life; farming now represents only 4% of global GDP instead of nearly all of it; and the political structure of the world is radically different from a few hundred years ago, with world affairs now being dominated by nation states constantly vying with each other for global supremacy. In order to come to an understanding of where things went wrong, and how they could be put right, it might be interesting to look into the factors that initiated each of these changes step-by-step, and to reconsider to what extent each new technological, social, economic, and political development was really beneficial – for the people who adopted them, for the wider human population of the planet, and, in the context of this article, for the farmer's relationship with the land that she or he was caring for.

Gareth Lewis

"Winnowing" This drawing is based on an illustration by Olivier Perrin (1761-1832), Vie des Bretons de l'Armorique