

**Review of Campbell, Hugh (2020) *Farming Inside Invisible Worlds: Modernist Agriculture and its Consequences*. Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN: 9781350327740**

**<https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/farming-inside-invisible-worlds-9781350120549/>**

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Farming is visible in Aotearoa New Zealand in so many everyday ways. Two giant pioneer farmers striding across the landscape on this book's cover clearly signal a critical view of farming to an academic audience, used to uncovering the hidden workings of commodity markets and the stakeholder interests embedded in new farm technologies. But a different reader might interpret the two figures as heroic, hardworking pioneers who triumphed over the adversities presented by wild nature. As well as the academic, the Prologue may speak to readers of that genre of biographies and memoirs of farmers, increasingly popular since the 1960s, explaining farming lives to farmers to come and to city dwellers who have been increasingly losing their entrée behind the farm gate. If these readers skip to page two of the book they will be introduced to a family "doing family" and "doing farming" practices. The Prologue may captivate people from many camps and seduce a wider audience into Campbell's worlds. Since Mona Anderson's *A River Rules My Life* we have been updated by Christine Fernyhough's *The Road to Castle Hill*, or *Country Calendar's* Lake Hawea [25 June 2022<sup>1</sup>] episode on TV which revealed a more contentious collision between entrepreneurial approaches to consumer expectations and productivist culture. Campbell's style, not afraid to be witty, passionate, wistful or ironic to advance the narrative, encourages engagement, he never descends into the bitter anger that will prevent dialogue. Marion Familton's paintings evoke the black and white aesthetic of farming histories and give the sense of the land as precious as well as bringing out specific innovations discussed in the text.

There are many wicked problems calling out for a bridge between academia, personal narratives and journalism, an increasing need for public intellectuals who can help us re-vision our still dominant primary sector. Although few of the "facts" of Campbell's approach to the historical role of farms in the colonization of Aotearoa New Zealand were new to me, the vivid way in which they were integrated with his family's histories created a narrative that could allow me and many Aotearoa New Zealanders to see our settlement and farming history in a new light.

While the effectiveness of the theorising of these farms and the relations in which they were/are embedded was commented on by academic reviewers of the open access e-book or expensive hardcover edition, the paperback will take the message to a wider audience;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/friend-of-lake-hawea-station-owners-hits-out-at-country-calendar-critics/RO6KOMTC4POVLS5ND7KTDQN7EQ/>

public libraries in Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin have already started this. The hard-core theorising is confined to Chapter One *Farming and ontology* and the end notes, followed through to a lesser extent in Chapter Four *The crisis of modernist farming*, and the epilogue *Theorizing the ontology of farms*. The argument about the visibility/invisibility of crucial developments in farming is recapped at each strategic point for the generalist reader.

The end notes are essential to making the argument accessible to those who are still working towards mastery of this body of work as well as the experts. Here the reader will find a book within a book, approximately 50 pages of notes doing much more than referencing. As well as tracing the roots of the argument in Agri-Food scholarship, there are long footnotes on Campbell's own positioning within the Agri-food field. There is elaboration of areas of history that are subject to debate about evidence and its interpretation. Depending on the readers' interests, they can explore the evolution of nationalism, growing recognition of the value of Māori approaches to the conflict between economic growth and environment, further reflections on family history and details on the case studies which are being used to illuminate how farming might transmute into a set of practices that are effective within an environment.

Given the current need for more dialogue over wicked problems where environmental, social, or cultural needs are being potentially stalemated by the economic imperatives of the past I recommend this book to people from all backgrounds.

### **Overview of the chapters**

The **Prologue** sets out the research direction, how the power to make some people and aspects of the material world invisible will be examined through a history of the farm. This is coupled with an account of the specifics of Aotearoa New Zealand as a country with an "atypically large" farm sector, "one of most export-oriented food producers in the world" created through a "profound discontinuity with past land use" (Campbell 2021: 1-2). Power hides indications of the ecological chaos that accompanied the formation of our economy and will blight our environment if climate change is not reduced. The narrative arc of the book hinges on the rise of settler farming and its relative fall once science, control, and stability were disrupted by the "great betrayal" of 1973 when the UK joined the EEC. Campbell's family history and the concept of the good farmer and the good farm in the Aotearoa New Zealand he grew up with are introduced. They provide insight into how the various actors may have experienced this history and made the succession of decisions in "good faith" that with hindsight he believes created a farming system that is both destructive and unfair. Its limitations are illuminated as shifts in governance towards enacting the spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi and addressing a medium-term future dominated by climate change and global instability proceed erratically.

Chapter One, as mentioned, deals with **Farming and ontology**. It considers Aotearoa New Zealand as emblematic of much wider transformations across settler states and other sites

of modernist farming, explaining why modernism/colonialism is preferred to the lens of capitalism and linking this to political ontology with its emphasis on the material and mundane (rooted in the work of Annemarie Mol, John Law, Bruno Latour). The farm embodies the inextricable mix of environmental, social, economic and political history which was required for settlement to erase indigenous worlds in Aotearoa New Zealand (as happened in other settler societies). The farm is made accessible to understanding through an ontological approach by dealing with the non-human agents which will be essential to bringing forward alternative agriculture. Political ontology focuses on inequities we should aspire to eliminate from our evolving forms of farming. This is backed by a brief history of the New Rural Sociology, Agri-Food Studies, feminist critiques of the internal relationships of family farming, Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor Network Theory (ANT), acknowledging their conceptual contributions and the varieties of farming and other situations that birthed them.

Vandana Shiva's fundamental criticism of the monocultures of the mind leading to exclusion of relationships and ecologies from view is demonstrated through the potential death of Lake Waihora/ Ellesmere. Two farms within its watershed are introduced. One is an organic farm enlivened by extended networks with consumers, neighbours and other farming practitioners. It also attends to its relationship with the wider ecosystem, in ontological terms it has weak boundaries. The other is a conventional export dairy farm with hard boundaries within which inputs, production of food and pollution are measured by standardised metrics. Its weak wider networks (mainly with the exporter and local university) relate to modern ontologies.

**Chapter Two, The colonial farm and its powers**, introduces farms as "a primary agent" of colonization, enacting new realities, erasing indigenous land use and pushing through ecological barriers of forest, wetland, and high country tussock. The chapter will detail the chaos created by the arrival of sailors and end with the beginnings of stabilization of the farm structures that dominated our thinking and economy for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Campbell writes "if Aotearoa was a garden, New Zealand had the potential to be a farm" (2020: 47). By the latter he refers to the settlement of Aotearoa New Zealand in response to the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of internationalisation of food production which enables a small group of western countries to feed growing industrial workforces. The shift coincided with development of agricultural science and new technology unimagined by Māori and resulted in the settler influx that overran their economy and every other aspect of their lives.

Campbell manages the divide between politics and economy writ large and our popular accounts of pioneering/settlement through reference to family members who established their farms at strategic moments in the push beyond the coastal extractive settlements. Early farms were **multi-functional** units combining trade, defence, processing and other services to allow a toehold outside the extractive industry centres close to ports. Within a generation this was parlayed into the final game plan of full-time scientific farming on large export-oriented units. While academic insights of environmental and post-colonial history uniting elements absent from narrower approaches dominate this chapter, by blending in

the family vignettes he supports his argument “farms became a site of self-mythologization: they assemble a newer, simpler order of knowledge, objects, relationships and potentials; and they do so by rendering invisible a multiplicity of other worlds (both past and future) while assembling a new more homogeneous object in their place.” (Campbell 2020: 72). These people can retain our sympathy and hope for a re-grounded future in spite of the destructive impact of their style of farming on environmental futures.

**Chapter Three, From colonial to modernist farming** covers the golden age of Aotearoa New Zealand farming – in which the process by which the compartmentalization of the farm that enables so much to be invisible is enacted. His processes are: 1) Private title, 2) reliance on the nuclear family (privatisation of world view literally fencing out the world), 3) assimilation of Māori and exclusion of their alternatives, 4) ecologically bounded ontologies in farm **practice**, and 5) separation of production and consumption. The environmental deterioration as natural fertility runs out, to be replaced by inputs such as fertiliser and machinery sourced from across the world is known as the “Grasslands Revolution”. Farming was “rendered technical” but at the same time its “cultural expression became a cipher for the normative character of the ‘good society’” (Campbell 2020: 103).

During this period, development of farms as capital operated for Pākehā only. The effectiveness of the family labour farm as business depended on “deep and stable affective ties between human participants in farm worlds and their farms” (Campbell 2020: 95); the justification for excluding Māori from credit and other development inputs being Māori would not invest the love and energy Pākehā did in their farms but dissipate it on care for extended kin. Production was decisively cut off from consumer preference, justified by their physical distance and “the modern” rational response of mass production. He demonstrates through this stabilization period that farms were not an outcome of modernity, they **produced** it, and the farming system’s stability and bounded-ness meant it was immune to critique, depoliticized for 50 years until 1973. The dialectical narrative arc of rise and fall hinges on the moment when Britain joins the EEC, crystalising the increasing global instability following the long boom post World War 2 within Aotearoa New Zealand farming.

**Chapter Four, The crisis of modernist farming** covers the period leading to the Fourth Labour Government of 1984-1990, much studied because of its massive impact on Aotearoa New Zealand generally by introducing neoliberal policies after the failure of state intervention to stabilize the local economy in response to increasing global challenges. It has often been narrated within farming as a drama during which Aotearoa New Zealand farmers were victims, many of whom eventually adapted and triumphed. Critical scholarship thinks differently. The recent challenges of environmentalism, strong dependency on a single market – China, whose geopolitical aspirations are not aligned to ours, reveal four fracture points suggesting temporary success.

1) The reassertion of the feral powers of the non-human world is examined through the destruction of grazing by the cyclone Bola disaster which was followed by a return to trees and the illegal release of RCD as the state withdrew from subsidisation and control of various farming problems. 2) Popular unrest leading to Aotearoa New Zealand’s Royal

Commission on Genetic Modification demonstrated the withdrawal of the “social license” of farming and science more generally and 3) the emergence of exports of organic production overseas by Watties leads to a discussion of new ways of governing /managing through audits and certification. Finally, there is the re-emergence of indigenous ontologies of land use, beginning with the Hikoi/Land March of 1975, and ending with the state’s *Vision Mātauranga*, as neoliberal policy enables diversification of problem solving following successful Māori business models and examples of co-governance in the public sector realm.

The chapter concludes as the dairying industry reorganises in 2001 just in time for the first Free Trade agreement with China. The problems with intensification over the last 20 years need no retelling for Aotearoa New Zealanders. The invisible in the political, economic, scientific and environmental realms can no longer be hidden, though they may be obfuscated by angst about a growing urban-rural divide promoted as justification by farm segments for the return of their social license.

To connect with the present, **Chapter Five, Farming inside visible worlds** begins with a personal account of the inexorable advance of intensive farming into the Waikato, recaps key moments in farming history then refers back to the bridging occurring between two worlds at the beginning of settlement, when Aotearoa New Zealand was still “a garden”. Can this be recreated on other farms today in a new farming world? The chapter proceeds through a series of case studies where environmental sensitivity has proved economically successful in the contemporary world. These range from individual level decisions, through Māori incorporations, to the reimagination of LandCorp as Pāmu, now a leader in innovation in sustainability and wellbeing including organics.

A review of argumentation concludes these varied farms have ontological powers – they assemble old knowledge in new ways and integrate it with new knowledge. They actively contest scientific rationalities and productivism in ways that can be seeded into other situations. Theoretically, farms appear to be a “particular form of capital” but one that can be reassembled around new ways of producing value. Critiques of modern farming as pathological (Miguel Altieri, Jules Pretty, James Scott) are set against accounts that suggest the future is less fixed by the present than may be expected, that the feral world keeps flux in view (J. K. Gibson-Graham, Bruno Latour, Michel Callon).

The academic audience is invited on to the **Epilogue** where Campbell will justify his focus on ontologies and the ability of farms to reveal invisible stories and demonstrate their historical agency as breachers of frontiers - including that of the failing modernist farming system. Once their conversion from contributors to subsistence into a form of capital is understood, a new style of Agri-Food theorisation is possible, where the farm is united with surrounding political, economic, ecological etc. influences and history is attached to place. Farm as analytical driver allows both structuralist and post-structuralist scholars space for theorizing and counters the racism embedded in modern accounts of farming. It can bring all the networks of connection into view and contribute to the “enactive turn” or power of scholarship to contribute to world making.

This book's best endorsement is it enhances the ability of a variety audiences to grapple with farm related issues and responsibilities. Providing convincing arguments about the processes at play on local farms is not predicting the future, which must be actively created within our everyday practices.