Ronald Vine: Views on Education. Part Two: 1945-1959

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Part One of this article (see Volume 7, Issue 1) covered Ron Vine's observations of Maori education in the years immediately before World War II. Part Two covers his wider ranging opinions of agricultural education in New Zealand. To accompany his writing Ron habitually took photographs, some of which were included in Part One; unfortunately no original photographs relating to the articles used in Part Two survive.

'Does New Zealand, a predominantly agricultural and pastoral country, give the land its proper place in education?' Ron asked late in 1945.

> It is an obligation of a secondary school, if it is to perform its function fully, to identify itself with, and strive to serve, the particular pattern of life of the community in which it is set.
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> Secondary schools in New Zealand serve communities of a great many different kinds … Can a schedule of secondary education very largely based on a standardised curriculum be considered to serve, in the best possible way, the communities of all these different environments?
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> And if the land – its lore, its demands and its cultural and practical potentials – is not made too much of for city dwellers, can it be said to have the place it should in the same education given to boys and girls whose lives, and whose parents' lives, are largely tied up with the land?[1]

Teaching agriculture in an agricultural country had long been a fought ideology between those who believed that education should be classically-based and those who wanted it to be more vocational. Early in the twentieth century the Education Department attempted to encourage agricultural subjects in secondary schools against the resistance of local Education Boards until the Department was forced to centralise secondary school management.[2] In primary schools agricultural subjects were taken 'not as a vocational

[1] 'Michael Hartnell' [H.R. Vine]: The soil and its place in education. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 1 November, 1945

[2] Strachan, J.E., Campbell, D., & Hilgendorf, F.W. (1936). Agricultural education. In H. Belshaw (ed.), *Agricultural organization in New Zealand: A survey of land utilization, farm organization, finance and marketing*. Published for the New Zealand Institute of Pacific Relations by the Melbourne University Press in association with Oxford University Press.

development, but almost entirely as a method of using the child's environment more directly as a means of education. The development of a real and live interest in living processes tends to bring the child into harmony with the environment'.[3] The Department of Education employed itinerant agricultural instructors, and primary schools were encouraged to have garden plots, calf clubs and home garden projects. Many rural secondary schools had more focussed agriculture, dairy science and wool-classing training, but still two-thirds of the boys going into farming had no formal training. Ron, coming from a school-teaching family, supported agricultural education in schools; education, like science, was vital to the country's agricultural future as increasingly farmers had to think as well as work.

Ron's questions about the place of agriculture in education reflected a widespread debate at the time, and were probably triggered by his invitation to the 'North Waitemata Combined Schools Show' at Wainui, north of Auckland. The article of that visit[4] is a discussion of the place of agriculture in rural education mixed with wry observations such as those of the adults 'wearing that expression of benign resignation that belongs only to school teachers in charge of parties of children on festive excursions'.

The main part of the show was the calf judging, and Ron recognised that he was watching children, not at a show, but at school:

> They were learning a great many of the things that are vital in an effective education for country boys and girls, things that are much more vital and significant than a technical knowledge of how to rear a calf and teach it to lead … rather than this, a calf club is deliberately used as an aid in education – not necessarily education about calves, but general education: … arithmetic, writing, art and the more important subject of character building through perseverance, tolerance, initiative and a preliminary tempering of the character to the vicissitudes that lie ahead of boys and girls whose future is on the land.

An undercurrent that ran through much of the debates around agriculture and education at the time was the steady drift from country to town, and Ron thought that 'the work of a calf club helps to give a rural way of life a more accurate perspective in the developing outlook of a boy or girl. If we give country boys and girls town educations, why should we be surprised and alarmed when they show an inclination to grow up and go to work in towns?' In his speech to open the Wainui show the chairman of the Auckland Education Board, G.K. Hamilton, averred that it was impossible for a child's character to develop fully without learning to care for some living thing. Ron went on that:

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[3] Strachan, J.E., Campbell, D., & Hilgendorf, F.W. (1936). Agricultural education. In H. Belshaw (ed.), *Agricultural organization in New Zealand: A survey of land utilization, farm organization, finance and marketing*. Published for the New Zealand Institute of Pacific Relations by the Melbourne University Press in association with Oxford University Press.

[4] 'Michael Hartnell' [H.R. Vine]: Learning by doing. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 10 January, 1946

> Keeping a calf is not like keeping a guinea pig or a rabbit; a calf is part of the farm economy – indeed it is part of the national economy, and its owner must learn to take fairly on his shoulders his share of the responsibility of so serious a business. And a boy or girl who successfully rears a calf and, perhaps, wins an award in a school competition experiences a pride of achievement and develops a confidence in himself that is beyond the power of classroom learning to give … Boys and girls … when they keep their calves at home, and keep them and rear them in the environment of the actual farm – they are up against its particular problems, they enjoy its particular advantages. No one, unless he is a clod, can help but see the value of this bond between school life and farm life in the education of country boys and girls at their most impressionable age. Indeed, the bond is more than between school and parents; it is also between farmers and their children – a basis for an understanding of the individual problems of each.

A number of rural high schools ran agricultural enterprises of their own along the lines of the Horohoro Native School.[5] Northcote District High School – now part of the Auckland conurbation but then in horticultural country – established a registered horticultural garden in its own right, which in its second year had grown to 3 acres [1.2 ha]. Its objectives, according to the principal Vryn Evans, were to allow secondary pupils to obtain a sound scientific horticultural knowledge, to demonstrate the commercial possibilities of small-area farming, to develop the idea that horticulture was a pleasant and cultural pastime and most desirable for the use of leisure hours, and to increase the usefulness of the school in the community which was largely engaged in small-area farming.[6]

The enterprise, Vryn Evans insisted, was no stunt. As well as horticulture it taught commerce through the cooperative company that had been formed among the horticulture course pupils. 'While we are talking', he told Ron, 'a class of Form 3 boys is measuring up various sections of the garden and so calculating areas and drawing plans based on their measurements. Then, again, the construction of a storage shed calls in the assistance of the woodwork department, and the metalwork boys are waiting eagerly for the tractor to break down'. The following year the school planned to expand into floriculture for 'the girls, so that every pupil … will have the opportunity to be associated with … the work of the soil'.

At the same time a somewhat different agricultural training scheme was covered, Ron again using my name for the article.[7] In 1932 A.N. Gribble had founded the Auckland Boys' Employment Committee to assist boys caught up in the depression. Gribble's premise was that the solution to the problems of many city boys lay in the land, and the scheme was to find work for them on

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[5] See Vine, M. (2010). Ronald Vine: Views on Education. Part One: 1934-1939. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, 7*(1), 64-73

[6] 'Michael Hartnell' [H.R. Vine]: The soil and its place in education. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 1 November, 1945

[7] 'Michael Hartnell' [H.R. Vine]: Youth goes on the land. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 13 December, 1945

farms in the Auckland district. When the scheme ran into criticism that it merely led city boys up blind alleys of farm work with no prospect of ever being able to own their own farm, Gribble founded the Auckland Youths' Farm Settlement Board to help boys who showed 'the essential qualities for successful farm ownership' to own their own farms.

As a relief operation it helped some of the boys who were 'literally starved out of the city', but by 1945 the scheme, by then run by the Education Board, was taking boys with several years secondary education or even university qualifications. 'The general calibre of the lads is improving', the supervisor, Mr Kirk, said:

> The day is gone when it was thought that anyone could be a farmer – that if a boy was a misfit in the town, the thing to do with him was to put him on a farm … We believe that the future of farming calls for the best brains possible … We feel that the selection of lads for farms should be on a higher plane than for ordinary city jobs; the boy who goes to work on a farm goes away from his home and lives with people other than his own.

Reflecting the country's strong agricultural base and the desire to revive the industry after the war were campaigns to establish agricultural colleges in South Auckland and Southland, something that also interested the Stratford District High School. This school in Taranaki already ran a 20 acre dairy farm with 10 Jerseys and a couple of 'fine' Tamworth sows,[8] but unlike the Horohoro (primary) school farm, it employed a man to milk the cows. Although the boys on the agricultural course spent about 25 per cent of their time on the farm, all the boys, even those in professional courses, had some agricultural work: 'It is of great value to the professional and business people of a country town to have some knowledge of the kind of work their clients are engaged upon'. And in Kaikohe an unused military hospital, along with a 740 acre block of land, was to be used as an agricultural high school,[9] now Northland College. Much of the land was undeveloped, so presumably the pupils would be developing it themselves.

A rather different approach was taken by the Whangarei District High School.[10] There Mr H.R. Heward believed that agricultural education in New Zealand suffered because agricultural courses were merely haphazard developments of the nature study and school gardening taught in primary schools and 'that as such their approach to the problem is unrealistic, failing to introduce boys to and prepare them for the farming way of life as it really is in this country', thus bringing agricultural education into disrepute with many farmers and consequently lessened the demand for it.

Each year Heward took his pupils – boys, every one – on a highly organised field trip that must have lasted a fortnight. The year Ron visited, the group of over 40 were at Waiau Pa near Pukekohe with Heward, who sounds

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[8] Special Representative: Dairy farming in education. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 13 December, 1945. Ron often wrote with no by-line, but sometimes used a pseudonym or was given the descriptor 'special correspondent' or 'representative'.

[9] 'Michael Hartnell' [H.R. Vine]: Another agricultural high school use for unused war hospital. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 21 February, 1946

[10] H.R. Vine: Learning about farming. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 11 November, 1948

as though he had been in the army, 'the camp's C.O., quartermaster, administration, stores and personnel relations officer … issuing, between strokes of his morning's shave, instructions to meet each moment's dilemma – the lost notebook, the missing broom, the blocked lavatory'. The boys talked to farmers who had agreed to take part, completing a questionnaire with over 200 questions on such things as the type and location of the farm, water supply, layout, pastures, weeds, fertilisers used, stock, crops, machinery, buildings, labour, drainage, erosion; some working for several days on a farm, and all completing management surveys including notes on the soil types and their possible geological origins, details of the various successions of vegetation that have covered it since the arrival of white settlers, the causes and possible treatments of the various types of erosion that affect it, and the particular farmer's methods of management and their reasons.

Ron was impressed, not least because knowing what affected life on each farm and its management fitted closely with his own approach to agricultural journalism:

> No need to have much imagination to visualise just how instructive these sessions can be to boys who are interested, and few boys are uninterested in a cowshed if they are listening to a description of it from a seat on the yard rails …[11]

He thought a weakness could be from absorbing information from farmers whose management might be faulty, but 'it does introduce the boys to farming in a very realistic way, showing them that circumstances may compel farmers to do things which they themselves may know to be theoretically wrong – a fact that is hidden from view sometimes by the four walls of a classroom'.[12]

In the same issue as that article, Ron argued editorially that visitors to New Zealand with its 'impressive record of agriculture production per head of population' would find agricultural education 'important, popular and respected'.[13]

> They would, of course, find no such thing. They would find, in fact, that in New Zealand agricultural education, and particularly agricultural courses in technical and other post primary schools, are looked on by the general population as the least important of all. The reason for this obviously false situation can probably be traced back to the old way of thinking of some parents – uneducated themselves – that 'Johnny hasn't enough brains to be a lawyer or a doctor; we'd better make him a farmer!'.[14]

Ron had become convinced that a fundamental flaw in agricultural education came from two assumptions: that boys entering farming should be

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[11] H.R. Vine: Learning about farming. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 11 November, 1948
[12] H.R. Vine: Learning about farming. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 11 November, 1948
[13] Editorial: Agricultural education in N.Z. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 11 November, 1948. Despite Ron's status as a freelancer, his relationship with the *Farmer* was such that he wrote a number of its editorials around this time, rising to some 50 per cent in the decade before he became editor.
[14] Editorial: Agricultural education in N.Z. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 11 November, 1948

recruited only from farming families and that they needed lesser education than those entering other professions.

> The growing complexity of both the business and technical sides of farming will gradually force any country which is inclined to think as we do into the conclusion that farmers in this competitive world must be as well educated as any other section of society, and more so than some. But do we have to wait to be thus prodded? … It seems that the principal thing which prevents us from giving to agricultural education the prestige and status it should have is an outmoded attitude of mind.[15]

Much of this outmoded attitude of mind Ron sheeted home to the Education Department, and at one stage he complained that its policy appeared to be to 'replacement of agriculture instructors by nature study specialists'.[16]

In June 1956 the Minister of Education appointed a committee to report on agricultural education. Ron was scathing of the 'wishy-washy' report it finally produced in 1959, well padded with history, covering matters not commonly seen as agricultural education such as land settlement policy, and with recommendations seemingly designed to offend no-one.[17] It was 'well sprinkled with … weak and generally meaningless phrases of committee jargon' to the extent that he found it disconcerting to read a report from a 'group of men in whom one should expect to find scholarliness, expressed in a downright unscholarly fashion'.

Because Ron considered that the 2 years' work by the 10 men had 'been no more than to mill about on the surface of the problem, without ever getting near its roots', he set out his ideas in the following issue of the *Farmer*. Narrowing down his discussion to post-primary education for boys who hoped to become farmers, he thought the basic question was whether agriculture should be taught as a special subject at all.[18] The committee had conceded that there were some who thought it should not, but asserted that it was introduced 'by popular demand', a statement the committee based on advocacy around 1905! But Ron thought it unlikely that the past education needs would be suitable for the future: 'What farmers of the future have to do is to turn out much more of a much better product from much less land, at a much lower cost and despite an ever-increasing array of biological and economic hazards':

> This is the sort of situation being encountered in many important industries beside farming and in every industry – including farming – it is pointing to the need for more and more scientific research and a corresponding need for an increasing standard of skill, intelligence and judgement in assimilating and applying the knowledge gained through that research.[19]

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[15] Editorial: Agricultural education in N.Z. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 11 November, 1948
[16] Editorial: Why the delay? *The New Zealand Farmer,* 7 October, 1954
[17] H.R. Vine: A wishy-washy report on farm education. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 5 March, 1959
[18] H.R. Vine: Aims of farm education need lifting. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 19 March, 1959
[19] H.R. Vine: Aims of farm education need lifting. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 19 March, 1959

The point at issue, he believed, was not what was taught in agricultural secondary school courses, but whether the course would identify the boys capable of becoming effective farmers, whether or not they came from country or city. Ron concluded that what farming needed, 'and will need more and more, are the brightest boys – from town or country. Boys who are capable of taking, say, a scientific degree in their stride, even though eventually they may not do so':

> The important thing about education as a preliminary to farming, then, is that it should seek out boys of this standard of intelligence and weed out the rest, just as education preparatory to the practice of medicine or law or engineering, weeds out those not intellectually fitted for a calling requiring so high a standard of skill and mental application.
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> Do agricultural courses do this? What they do, in fact, is the very opposite. They provide too often an outlet for the less bright pupils (and sometimes for the less bright teachers, too) and encourage boys and their parents to believe that, because they are not quite up to an academic course, or not interested in one, they will do for farmers …[20]

Ron was hugely interested in history and supportive of its place in the country's identity, but he never believed that it was a sufficient basis for today's farming. What worked well yesterday would not necessarily be sufficient for tomorrow.

[20] H.R. Vine: Aims of farm education need lifting. *The New Zealand Farmer,* 19 March, 1959

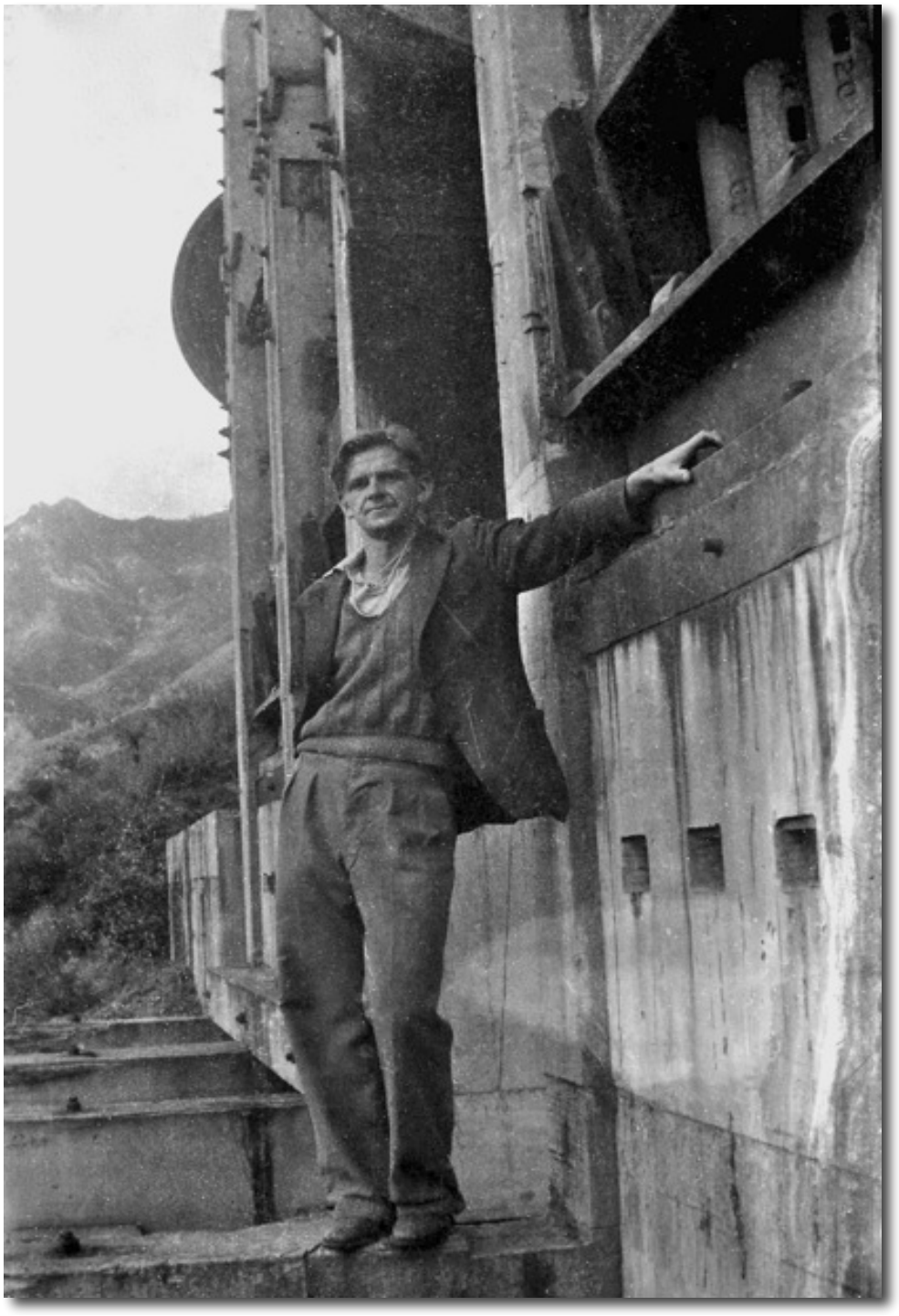
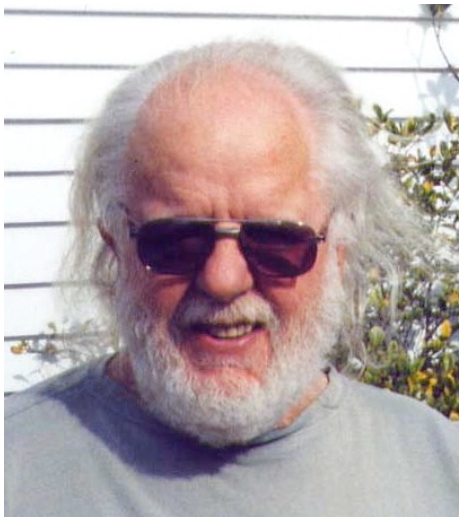


Figure 1. Ron Vine at ruins of the Sylvia (gold) battery, Tararu Valley, Thames Coast, 1936.

[Photo: probably Hector Macpherson (editor, *The Weekly News*)]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MIKE VINE



Mike Vine, son of Ron Vine, was born in Auckland and schooled at Warkworth District High School and Mahurangi College, and in 1972 gained a BSc in forestry from the University of Wales. He has worked for the Forest Research Institute in Rotorua and later for the Water and Soil Division of the Ministry of Works and Development in Palmerston North assessing plants for erosion control.

During the 1980s he was Senior Soil Conservator for the Hauraki Catchment Board in Te Aroha before moving to the Bay of Plenty as a planner for the Bay of Plenty Regional Council and the Rotorua District Council, working on policies for water and soil management and pest control.

Now retired in Raglan, he is writing – at glacial speed – a biography of his father. He is married with two adult children and is an ordained Anglican priest.