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Sir Albert Howard --In Memoriam

By J.I. Rodale

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ON October 20th the sad news came across the cables that Sir Albert Howard had quietly passed away that morning of a heart attack suffered at his home in Blackheath, nine miles from London, at the age of 74.

It is deeply distressing to think that the leader of the organic farming movement is no more, that he who has won international fame for his labors in the interests of the soil will soon be laid to rest in that same brown soil which was the passion of his life. It is still incredible that the man from whom we heard in every mail, whom we plied with a thousand questions and whose magnetic personality and deathless friendship were felt in every sheet and envelope he sent, has passed from the scene. Although he had continued to work unremittingly until his last moments and had seemed to be in good health, it is certain that the trying conditions with which he, like all his fellow Britishers, had been coping in these recent years had been insidiously undermining his vigor.

Circumstances and conditions militated against the Howards' acquisition of a place large enough to produce their own food, which, had they been able to achieve, would undoubtedly have meant the prolongation of Sir Albert's life. Food being scarce in England, friends on this side occasionally sent packages to the Howards, a mere token endeavor to help. Still, he lived beyond the Biblical allotment of three-score years and ten.

It is one of the insalubrious regrets of my life that I never had the honor of meeting Sir Albert personally. Yet I feel that our relations have been as close as if we had had weekly meetings in the intimate sessions of personal friends. We needed only to ask a favor of each other to find it done. Sir Albert would search in the second-hand stalls of London bookshops in which to find some rare book of which I had need. Recently he undertook the task of obtaining some photographs from the Royal Geographical Society for a book which I am engaged in writing. On our side, we filled the need of Sir Albert for books and bulletins. We were like inseparable, inveterate friends.

I was frequently delighted by Sir Albert's copious use of American slang in his personal letters to me. Sir Albert's honesty and flexibility always inspired in me the most profound respect and veneration. He had developed the Indore method of making compost over a period of thirty years in India and attained world-wide fame because of it. One would imagine that he would have ardently preserved and doggedly fought over its every tenet, every split hair of its principle. Yet, when we discovered on this side of the ocean that the two turnings of the compost could be eliminated by employing earthworms for that purpose, he applauded heartily, reprinting in his publication, *Soil and Health*, our article describing that method. On other occasions, too, he zealously exhibited the same totally dispassionate and altruistic interest in contributions by others to his own life's purpose and project.

With his scintillating spark of genius and that paramount ability of leadership in his field, he corresponded with people all over the world, seeing the seeds of his work planted in New Zealand, Australia, Rhodesia, Palestine, India, Central America, Canada, the United States and many other countries where organic farming societies are now flourishing. He answered hundreds of letters every month, promptly and with exemplary thoroughness. Through my knowledge of him there were dozens of persons in the United States who maintained a steady correspondence with Sir Albert. It was a strenuous program for a man of 74, and demanded that he give unstintingly of his time, his energy, and his money.

He fought the chemical companies, the college professors, and all the vested interests that placed considerations of financial profit ahead of the welfare of man and that of the soil. Fearing no one, he gave others the courage to fight, himself setting the example and the pattern. A strong and stalwart bulwark, defender of the soil, he tilted intrepidly with the chemical dragons. He had a kind of picturesque grandeur and strength that commanded the admiration and respect of friend and foe. From his own richly metaphor-laden language comes the opprobrious phrase, "devil's dust," with which he dubbed chemical fertilizers.

On the very morning of his passing, October 20th, I received what I suppose I shall have to enshrine as his last letter to me. Dated October 15th: in it he pledged \$100.00 as a donation to the new *Soil and Health Foundation*, saying "I will send you soon some suggestions about the work of the Foundation. This is only to say how pleased I am that you have made a beginning." It is for us to hope that the work of the Foundation will do honor to the memory of Sir Albert Howard.

Here is a word of advice given to the people of the United States by Sir Albert in that same letter: "Whatever your Government does, for heaven's sake try to stop them from lending us any more money. We could grow the food we want on this island, if we made a real national effort. The advice of the U.S.A. to John Bull should be: 'Root, hog, or die.' Once we got our soil into shape, England would be born again. Sometimes it is a case of being cruel to be kind. This is one such occasion."

We agriculturists thank him for his work in behalf of a troubled world, for his brilliant efforts in showing science that, unless it tempers itself somewhat, it may some day soon lead to world destruction. In his eyes shone only the most compassionate love and devotion, that total dedication to the regeneration of the soil to which he gave his life.

Sir Albert Howard, the world salutes you! The world, both its great and its pitiable common men who must resign their sad lives to a long oblivion as they chant to Mother Earth their immemorably pathetic plaint, '*te morituri salutamus.*' Your memory, however, will be forever green. Your accomplishments will go down through the ages, your spirit haloed with undimmed brilliance.

J. I. RODALE