



FOREWORD BY  
DAVID KLINE

WATER  
*at the*  
ROOTS

PHILIP BRITTS

Poems and Insights  
of a Visionary Farmer



# WATER *at the* ROOTS

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.



# WATER

*at the*

# ROOTS

Poems and Insights  
of a Visionary Farmer

**PHILIP BRITTS**

*Edited by Jennifer Harries*



PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

Published by Plough Publishing House  
Walden, New York  
Robertsbridge, England  
Elsmore, Australia  
www.plough.com

Plough produces books, a quarterly magazine, and Plough.com to encourage people and help them put their faith into action. We believe Jesus can transform the world and that his teachings and example apply to all aspects of life. At the same time, we seek common ground with all people regardless of their creed.

Plough is the publishing house of the Bruderhof, an international community of families and singles seeking to follow Jesus together. Members of the Bruderhof are committed to a way of radical discipleship in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. Inspired by the first church in Jerusalem (Acts 2 and 4), they renounce private property and share everything in common in a life of nonviolence, justice, and service to neighbors near and far. To learn more about the Bruderhof's faith, history, and daily life, see Bruderhof.com. (Views expressed by Plough authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Bruderhof.)

Copyright © 2018 by Plough Publishing House  
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-87486-128-0  
22 21 20 19 18 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Cover image, *Golden Beets*, by Yara Anderson. Reproduced by permission of the artist. Photographs of Hiroshima and Bristol public domain. Artwork on pages iii, vii, and 162 by Asuka Hishiki. Used by permission. All other photographs copyright © Plough Publishing House.

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.  
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Britts, Philip, 1917-1949, author. | Harries, Jennifer, editor. |  
Kline, David, writer of foreword.

Title: Water at the roots : poems and insights of a visionary farmer / Philip  
Britts ; edited by Jennifer Harries ; foreword by David Kline.

Description: Walden, New York : Plough Publishing House, [2017] | Includes  
index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017030974 (print) | LCCN 2017041087 (ebook) | ISBN  
9780874861297 (epub) | ISBN 9780874861303 (mobi) | ISBN 9780874861327 (  
pdf) | ISBN 9780874861280 (pbk.)

Classification: LCC PR6003.R3866 (ebook) | LCC PR6003.R3866 A6 2017 (print) |  
DDC 821/.912--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017030974>

Printed in the United States of America

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.



*Faith is like water at the roots.*

PHILIP BRITTS

# CONTENTS

*Foreword* ix

*To the Reader* xv

**I WILDERNESS** 1

**2 PLOUGHING** 18

**3 PLANTING** 44

**4 CULTIVATING** 71

**5 HARVESTING** 106

*Epilogue* 152

*Index of Poem Titles and First Lines* 158



Philip Britts,  
Caacupé,  
1943



This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

# FOREWORD

ix

---

DAVID KLINE

I wish I could have met Philip Britts. Not only was he a prolific writer and poet, a pastor, an astute observer of his natural surroundings, and, to use a phrase of his, a steward of the mysteries of God; he was also a true landsman. Although I was only a child when Philip died, it is here, as a farmer, that I immediately connect with this gifted man. While I am not a trained horticulturist as Philip was, I too am a keeper of the orchard. I plant and prune and harvest.

As editor of *Farming Magazine*, I often receive letters from readers in cities. One in the Bronx wrote, “I don’t have a farm, but my heart is there. I grow tomato plants in a window box.” Philip’s words are also for people like this; he knew that even though most people do not have land to farm and cannot grow the food they eat, everyone hungers, at least at some level, for a connection with nature. And he saw this hunger in the context of a related problem: our disconnectedness from one another. As he wrote in one essay:

Man’s relationship to the land must be true and just,  
but it is only possible when his relationship to his fellow

man is true and just and organic. This includes the relationship of all the activities of man, the relationship of industry with agriculture, of science with art, the relationship between sexes, and above all, the relationship between man's spiritual life and his material life.

One of the great tragedies of the modern world is the complete divorce of the city dwellers from nature and the land. . . .

The decisive factor in the success of the farmer will be, ultimately, the love of farming. This love comes when we find, not in nature, but through and behind nature, that something which impels worship and service. Part of the glory of farming is that indescribable sensation that comes, perhaps rarely, when one walks through a field of alfalfa in the morning sun, when one smells earth after rain, or when one watches the ripples on a field of wheat; the sensation hinted at by the poet, when his

*Restless ploughman pauses, turns and wondering,  
Deep beneath his rustic habit, finds himself a king.\**

This love is fed by understanding, by knowledge. Without going the whole way with Leonardo da Vinci and his "perfect knowledge is perfect love," the more one knows of the mysteries of the earth the better one can love farming in the sense of giving one's service to it.

It is obvious that Philip Britts lived the life he wrote about. He knew that working with nature and her seasons matters, that farming is not just a matter of tilling the land but loving it, of nurturing instead of exploiting it. Despite his short life, he lived fully and generously. What he wrote seven decades ago is as pertinent today as when he wrote it, perhaps even more so in this greed-driven

\* A.E. (George William Russell), "Earth Breath."

society where many thoughtful people are looking at intentional community and sustainable living as alternatives to consumerism.

Philip, I think, would argue that while we can promote such alternatives regardless of where we live, it is best to move not just spiritually but also physically from places of decadence. Maybe not to a cave in the mountains, but to the land, where one can be nurtured and be a nurturer in return. Where one can, like Elijah, in quietness, in the natural world, listen to the voice of God.

I wonder what Philip would have to say about today's agribusiness, or about the mindset that believes technology will solve all the world's food production problems. Philip clearly believed in exercising caution: before welcoming a new agricultural development simply because it is scientifically plausible or commercially profitable, we ought to take care to avoid or diminish any moral harm it might cause. One cannot help thinking here of genetically engineered plants developed to allow minimum tillage, which have led to millions of acres of farmland being soaked with herbicides.

Philip's writings indicate that he understood what Omar Bradley meant when he said, "Technology is a useful servant but a dangerous master." Although many of us do not live in an intentional community like Philip and his family did, we can heed his wisdom and take steps to control technology to the point that it doesn't displace our neighbor.

Philip's writings remind me of the farming community I grew up in. My father was a thresher for many years. At one point he worked for twenty-five neighbors, spending day after day at their farms threshing, husking corn,



hulling clover, and filling silos with corn. Those neighbors—Methodists, Catholics, Mennonites, Lutherans, and Amish—all shared their labor for the common good. As I told my father, he probably saw the best years of American agriculture, a period when there was enough technology to lighten your load but not enough to replace your neighbor. When my father lay dying, I would turn to his diaries from his years as an active farmer, and read from them to him. “Yes, yes,” he would remember; and he would smile.

But back to the poetry that forms the heart of this book: in spite of the many hardships Philip and his community weathered in leaving his native England and hacking out a livelihood in the harsh wilderness of Paraguay, poetry never stopped flowing out of him, like water from a spring. With Wendell Berry, he believed that “life is a miracle.” And as his last poem, “Toucan,” shows, he never lost his youthful sense of wonder:

The boy there,  
Standing, staring,  
Staring at the bird—  
Eyes alight, breath held,  
Bare toes gripping the sand,  
Wonder-held.  
The boy there,  
Standing, staring—  
That’s my son—  
A sound from me  
And he will turn,  
Dart to me,  
“Daddy, did you see?”

Reading Philip's prose and poetry, you feel the kinship he had with all living things around him, both human and wild. His ability to see into the mysteries of their lives reminds me of what I have read of the Lakota Sioux. They knew that, removed from nature, a person's heart becomes hard; and that lack of respect for living things soon leads to lack of respect for one's fellow humans too. Philip kept himself close to the softening influence of nature.

To be sure, Philip's poetry also reveals his total commitment to Christ as Lord of his life. He believed the Sermon on the Mount where it reads, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33), and he trusted the promise of the Psalmist, who wrote, "I will both me lay down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:8). And yet this belief in God and in the goodness of creation did not make Philip self-satisfied. On the contrary, whether writing poetry, farming, or probing the science behind it, he kept grappling with the question, "How shall we live?" It is this tireless search that gives him undiminished relevance so many years after his early death and makes his contributions as a poet and a lover of the land deserving of as wide an audience as possible.

---

David Kline, an Amish organic farmer in Ohio, has written three books: *Letters from Larksong*, *Great Possessions*, and *Scratching the Woodchuck*.

# TO THE READER

xv

---

JENNIFER HARRIES

Let this be the way that I go,  
And the life that I try,  
My feet being firm in the field,  
And my heart in the sky.

Who was Philip Britts? His life was short, and his biographical details are easily summed up: He was a farmer and pastor, a husband and father. Born in 1917 in Devon, England, he became a pacifist and joined the Bruderhof, a Christian community. During the Second World War he moved to South America, where, in 1949, he died of a tropical illness at the age of thirty-one, leaving a widow with three young children and a fourth on the way.

The Bruderhof started in 1920 in Germany. Inspired by the first Christians, members hold property in common and try to follow Christ wholeheartedly, living out Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. In 1937, Hitler's government expelled the community and its members fled to England, where an offshoot of the original group had started a community on a farm in the

Costwolds the previous year. It was here that Philip and his wife Joan joined, as did my parents and I. From that time on, Philip's story and that of the community were intertwined.

Philip was a tall, thoughtful man, not given to many words; throughout his life, he retained the typical West Country speech of the Devon farmer, slow and deliberate. He loved the work on the land and the mystery of growing things. For him to be part of creation was joy—to work with nature, not against it, and “to see in growing corn the fingerprints of God.”

After Philip died, his friends began, from time to time, to receive gifts from his young widow: poems that she had found and collected after his death, and copied out for them.

Most of Philip's poems and essays have never been published before. Why now? His generation faced great dangers and upheavals, but so does ours. Philip's response to his own age's trials—to root himself in God and dedicate himself to a community and to the land he farmed—speaks to our age. Perhaps this is particularly true because his community was itself driven from country to country and continent to continent, and because the earth he tilled was not the West Country soil of his birthplace. His story is not a romantic agrarian elegy, a throwback, but a real human life lived in the thick of history.

Today, Philip Britts's record of his experience of the natural world is particularly poignant because we are, perhaps even more than he was, aware of the fragility of that world and of our role in stewarding it. Pope Francis has called our use of nature “indiscriminate and

tyrannical.” In his encyclical *Laudato si’* he writes, “The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.” Elsewhere, he has pointed out that “an economic system centred on the god of money needs to plunder nature to sustain the frenetic rhythm of consumption that is inherent to it. The monopolising of lands, deforestation, the appropriation of water . . . are some of the evils that tear man from the land of his birth.”

Today, time-tested social structures and moral teachings are being cast off, even trampled on. New wars erupt before old ones have ceased. And technological changes threaten to uproot us from the natural world. In a world of concrete and smartphones, we find ourselves craving reality.

Philip Britts shows us where and how we can slake that thirst. Later writers have shared his sense, best expressed in his poems, that nature is not just nature, but points to something mysterious and profound beyond itself. Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Paul Brand, and many others have sought to express the sense of awe, the link to the transcendent, that they find in the natural world. Wendell Berry writes about life as “miracle and mystery,” and Albert Einstein says, “One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvellous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day.”

But this is a mystery always at hand, an everyday miracle. As a farmer, Philip experienced this awe in the same soil that meant rootedness and hard work. And his

concern was never merely reconnecting to the land, as though that alone could heal us. Rather, he saw that in losing connection to the land, we are losing our humanity and our connection to each other, and that by losing our connection to the created world we are losing an avenue of awareness of the Creator. As a pastor, he read the book of nature together with the book of scripture, allowing them to illuminate each other: “Faith is like water at the roots,” he writes. “If we have faith, we can face the sun, we can turn the heat and the light into life-giving fruits, into love. . . . Faith is a gift like the rain, and like the rain it is something to be watched for and prayed for and waited for.”

Philip’s times saw many proposed solutions to the problems he witnessed, but after looking at the major movements of the day—the peace movement and socialism, among others—he found his answer closer to home: not in farming for its own sake, but in an attempt to live out his faith and the radical teachings of Jesus on a very personal and local level in an intentional community on the land. This was boots-on-the-ground discipleship, as he travelled with the community to a country far from that of his birth. And as you will see, it would cost him his life.

You will get to know Philip best by reading his own words. The backbone of this book, therefore, is a selection of his poems arranged roughly chronologically, with other writings of his interspersed. I have given these poems and writings context by telling the story of the man who wrote them. Philip was a family friend and a fellow member of the Bruderhof movement, and I have supplemented archival records with my own memories.



(My thanks to Miriam Mathis and Carole Vanderhoof, whose research made this book possible.) In keeping with Philip's poems, I have used British spelling throughout the book. Philip's words appear in black.

Philip Britts died young and in relative obscurity, but his vision continues to guide the community he helped lead through some of the most challenging years of its history. May Philip's poetry and insights also inspire you, the reader, in your own quest for deeper roots and greater wonder, and a practical way of life that makes both possible.

*xix*

TO THE READER

---

Jennifer Harries, a member of the Bruderhof, was born in Llansamlet, Wales. Having taught elementary school for decades, she now mentors younger teachers. She lives in New York.

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

An aerial, black and white photograph of a dense urban landscape. A wide river flows through the center of the city, flanked by tall buildings. In the upper left, a prominent Gothic cathedral with a tall spire is visible. The rooftops are varied in style, and the overall scene depicts a historic, well-developed city.

# WILDERNESS

CHAPTER I

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

*Look up to see if the God I serve has seen*

The town of Honiton, in Devon, southwest England, is surrounded by rich farmland. The River Otter flows nearby, leading down to the sea some ten miles to the south. Footpaths trace their way through the countryside. Here Philip Herbert Cootes Britts was born on April 17, 1917, and it was here that his lifelong love of farming and nature, hiking and camping, poetry and song first took root.

By the time he was four, though, his family had moved to a suburb of Bristol, a busy port city famed equally for its cathedral and its urban poverty. Here, his sister Molly was born.

Most of Philip's childhood memories were centred on Bristol, which was plagued by crime and unrest at the time, but from early on he preferred the countryside.

Philip went to grammar school and then looked for any kind of work to earn money for his university studies. He worked in a quarry, then took care of a wealthy man's orchid house. Later in life, Philip would tell stories about his escapades during these years. One ended in a major motorcycle accident that proved to be a turning point in his life.

Little more is known of his early life, but his earliest poems give a window into his thoughts.

ALONE

When the night is cold and the winds complain,  
And the pine trees sigh for the coming rain,  
I will light a lonely watch-fire, near by a lonely wood,  
And look up to see if the God I serve has seen and  
understood.  
I'll watch the wood-ash whitened by the licking yellow  
tongues,  
I'll watch the wood-smoke rising, sweet smoke that  
stings the lungs,  
See the leaping, laughing watch-fire throw shadows on  
the grass,  
See the rushes bend and tremble to let the shadows pass,  
While my soul flies through the forest, back a trail of  
weary years,  
And the clouds, as if in pity, shed their tears.  
Oh, I do not want their pity for a trail that's closed  
behind,  
Though all the things on earth combine to play upon  
the mind.  
I must keep on riding forward to a goal I'll never find—  
What matter the eyes have seen so much that the soul is  
colour-blind?

1934

It's not difficult to see the influence of the popular poets of the day – William Butler Yeats, John Masefield, A. E. Housman – on the young Philip's work.

“I SENT MY SOUL SEARCHING”

I sent my soul searching the songs of the ages,  
The hearts of all poets were bared to my eyes,  
Though I read golden thoughts as I turned golden pages  
The echoes fell faint as of songs that were sighs.

I weighed up the greatness of all who were greatest  
Whom the world had called strong and the world had  
called wise,  
But the song that they sang from the first to the latest  
Fell back from the portals of thy Paradise.

1934

## *Am I dreaming this wilderness?*

Philip's spiritual search did not cut him off from the political and social drama of his time and place. Rather, his questions thrust him into the heart of things. The 1930s were turbulent years for Europe and beyond, years of uncertainty and disillusionment. Socialism and a strong peace movement in England held promise, but rumours from Russia soon cast shadows on communism, and economic meltdown on the West's own grand visions of humankind's continuous progress.

This suffering soon struck close to Philip. Not far from Bristol, on the other side of the River Severn estuary, are the coal-mining valleys of South Wales. These valleys were hard hit during the Great Depression. There were hunger marches from 1922 to 1936, some nationwide, some local, to appeal to the government for help. In 1931 a hunger march of 112 people—many from the Rhondda Valley—marched to Bristol, their slogan “Struggle or starve.” The demonstration was broken up by mounted police.



## WORKING IN A CITY

There are so many songs that need to be sung.  
There are so many beautiful things that await  
The sensitive hand to pick them up  
From this strange din of busy living.

I hear an echo in my sleep,  
But I, caught up in the tide, like the rest,  
Must spend all my life for the means to live:  
I starve if I stop to sing—  
Yet this dull murmuring  
Will keep my heart forever hungering.

1936

The news from abroad was troubling as well. In 1936 both Hitler and Mussolini were consolidating their power. Germany and Italy, the Axis Powers, became allies. In March 1936, Hitler moved twenty thousand troops into the German Rhineland. Europe was on edge.

## WHILE WE RE-ARM

Behind the mountains of imagination,  
Screened off by passing mirth and passing tears,  
The mind of mortal man is holding unawares  
The harvest of a million weary years.

Some time, some place, some unsuspected dreamer  
Will catch an echo of the far refrain,  
And by his visions in a night of watching,  
Will break the misty barriers of the brain.

His song shall shake the souls of politicians,  
And while the craven church still watches, dumb,  
The hands of men shall grasp at tools, not weapons,  
And womanhood shall sing that peace has come.

1936

SANCTUARY

I may not move, while that lone tuft of cloud  
Still holds the fairy hues,  
An opal thrown against the sky;  
And were this shovel in my hand a waiting sword,  
And all the great crusaders beckoned me –  
I could not move, until the glory passed.

1936

UPON A HILL IN THE MORNING

The timid kiss of the winter sun,  
The waiting faith of the naked trees,  
The breath of a day so well begun,  
Take what you will and leave me these.

Leave me my love and leave me these,  
Leave me a soul to feel them still,  
Better to be a tramp, who sees,  
Than a monarch blind upon a hill.

1936

## THE DREAMER

I stood in flowers, knee high,  
Dreaming of gentleness,  
Dreams, in the promise of a shining sky  
That I should make a garden from a wilderness;  
I would subdue the soil and make it chaste,  
Making the desert bear, the useless good,  
With my own strength I would redeem the waste,  
Would grow the lily where the thistle stood.

The while I dreamed, the flowers were sweet,  
Now that the flowers are gone, it seems  
They never bloomed except in dreams.  
There are no blossoms at my feet,  
The bald blue sky is lustreless,  
The flowers had never been, except in dreams,  
It was a dream . . . this is a wilderness.

My eyes are tired of the skyline,  
My feet are tired of the sand,  
I am as dried of laughter as the sun-scorched land,  
As the staff in my sun-scorched hand.

Had I not dreamed so long,  
Not dreamed of so much beauty, or such grace,  
Mayhap I could have trod a quieter path,  
With other men, in a green, quieter place . . .

My ears are tired of the silence,  
My heart is tired of the toil.  
If I sowed any seeds, they have perished,  
Nothing is living in the soil.

From the dewless morn I have been here,  
Now the day is nearly through;  
The tyrant sun sinks down at last,  
The colours fade, the sun departs.  
Was there a glory – or was that a dream?

I hear, or think I hear, faint music:  
Not the song of birds, which are fled from me,  
Not the humming of bees, on dream blossom,  
Not the voices of happy men . . .  
I strain to catch the sound again . . .  
Oh! let the music swell, slowly,  
Mould a stately music, to soothe the pulse of the earth,  
Develop the theme –  
Do I pray? or hope? or dream?

I do not know if I dreamed I stood in a garden.  
(Was it a dream, the flowers' caress?)  
Or did I dream of the sun and the sand –  
Am I dreaming this wilderness?

1937

But while both spiritual and political questions demanded answers, there were others of a more personal nature to be asked as well. Philip had known Joan Grayling, his future wife, since childhood. We can surmise she is the muse in Philip's sometimes stormy poems of love.

#### DISTRUST

He saw the clouds creep up in stormy herds,  
He saw clouds hiding the eternal tors  
And clouds like a flock of wild white birds  
Winging across the sky towards the moors.  
Walking alone he saw the high clouds reeling  
In the changing skies,  
But his eyes were afraid and seeking,  
The voice in his heart was speaking,  
And he felt that the clouds were a ceiling  
Darkly forbidding his petulant spirit to rise.  
Solitude mocked silently.  
Sickened, he asked, "Oh, has she faith in me –  
The faith that makes men heroes?"  
Long after the echo, came a faint reply:  
"Find in yourself a faith as true,  
Faith is made, not of talk, but deeds,  
Lest she go loving on, but you –  
Go back to a harvest of weeds."

1936

VALENTINE VERSE

If we should walk in moonlight,  
My valentine and I,  
In slow step, by a stream of stars  
Where water lilies lie:  
Where the elm trees stand in silence  
Down the hill like a line of kings,  
And alone, in a world that listens,  
The nightingale sings:  
Sweet the smell of the meadow,  
Cool the kiss of the breeze,  
A dainty foot and a steady foot,  
Step slowly under the trees.  
If we should walk in moonlight,  
While we and our love are young,  
We should hear a softer music  
Than the nightingale has sung.

1937



## *We heard a call and hurried here*

Philip graduated from the University of Bristol in the spring of 1939. Now he had a degree in horticulture and a title: Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society. He seemed poised to enter a secure position in one of England's institutions of learning and research. In June he and Joan were married. The couple moved into a beautiful stone house with a walled garden, which they had recently purchased.

But war was in the air, and Philip had meanwhile become a convinced pacifist. What was he to do if he was called up for military service?

Philip was not alone in his stance. The Peace Pledge Union, founded in 1936, asked its members to sign this statement: "War is a crime against humanity. I renounce war, and am therefore determined not to support any kind of war. I am also determined to work for the removal of all causes of war." The Great War had been "the war to end all wars," but all the blood and sacrifice seemed only to usher in new bloodshed. In her autobiographical *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain recounted the losses of her generation, to conclude: "Never again." Philip had joined the Peace Pledge Union (PPU) in 1938, participating with great enthusiasm. He spoke about war

and peace in Sunday school classes and started a local PPU chapter in 1939. Joan shared his faith and his commitment to peace.

News from the Continent got worse. Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938 was followed by his invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later Britain declared war on Germany.

Winston Churchill gave rousing speeches: "We are fighting to save the whole world from the pestilence of Nazi tyranny and in defense of all that is most sacred to man. . . . It is a war, viewed in its inherent quality, to establish, on impregnable rocks, the rights of the individual, and it is a war to establish and revive the stature of man."

The peace movement caved in. Hundreds broke their pledge never to support war again and threw their energy into defending England. Even the chapter of the Peace Pledge Union that Philip had started succumbed to the militant mood sweeping the country: most members rushed to defend the homeland against Hitler's threatened invasion.

Then came a real blow: England's churches followed suit, joining its politicians in calling on the populace to support the war effort. But as lonely as Philip and Joan felt in their commitment to peace, they would not yield. They still hoped that it was not too late to avert war.

## INSANITY

We see mad scientists watching tubes and flasks,  
Staring at fluids with the power of death;  
Mad engineers that work out guns of steel  
And make great bombs that carry poison breath.

We hear mad statesmen speak of peace through arms,  
We read wild praises of the power that rends;  
And in the pulpits of the church of Christ  
Mad clergy tell us to destroy our friends.

We hear the drone of planes that townsmen build  
To scatter death and terror in the town;  
And hear the roar of tanks on country roads  
That will mow down our brothers, crush them down.

Lest this should happen, still more ships are launched;  
To ward off war, we spend more gold on arms,  
And lest the voice of Christ is heard to groan,  
We sound, more loudly, still more wild alarms.

## UNDATED

England was mobilizing. In May 1939 Parliament had passed the Military Training Act: twenty-one- and twenty-two-year old men could expect to be called up for six months of military service. The day war was declared, all men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one became liable for call-up.

Philip had dreamt of “so much beauty” and of “making a garden in the wilderness,” but what did the God he served want him to do in the realities of everyday life—in “the din of busy living” and the preparations for war?

Several years later, Philip told a story of this time: He had been in church listening to the minister. Suddenly the sermon became a call to arms, fanning patriotism, praising heroism, referring to Germans as monsters. Philip rose from his pew, walked quietly up to the pulpit, and asked the minister, in the slow, deliberate way that farmers have, whether he could give him a few minutes to address the congregation. The minister agreed, and Philip spoke: “Jesus said we should love our enemies.”

And then, one day in the fall of 1939, Philip and Joan read a newspaper article about a pacifist group in England whose members tried to live by the Sermon on the Mount, following the example of the early church. At this community, the Bruderhof, which had been recently expelled by the Nazis, Britons and Germans were living and working together as brothers and sisters. Was this what they had been looking for? Philip and Joan had to find out for themselves. That October, they cycled twenty-seven miles to the Cotswold Bruderhof. They stayed for a week and decided to return. Here was a way forward, an answer to their search.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44). Sells all that he has—nothing less is sufficient, all is nothing compared with the treasure. Let the field be the divine counsel of God. Hidden within it the treasure—the kingdom—the precious secret of the field.

In November 1939 Philip and Joan sold their house, left family and friends, and moved to the Cotswold community. Giving away all his possessions and launching into

an uncertain future, Philip jotted these lines: “How rich is a man who is free from security. / How rich is a man who is free from wealth.”

CAROL OF THE SEEKERS

We have not come like Eastern kings,  
With gifts upon the pommel lying.  
Our hands are empty, and we came  
Because we heard a Baby crying.

We have not come like questing knights,  
With fiery swords and banners flying.  
We heard a call and hurried here –  
The call was like a Baby crying.

But we have come with open hearts  
From places where the torch is dying.  
We seek a manger and a cross  
Because we heard a Baby crying.

CHRISTMAS 1939

“THE OLD ROAD TIRES ME”

The old road tires me  
And the old stale sights,  
And I must wander new ways  
In search of sharp delights  
With new streams and new hills  
And smoke of other fires;  
For a new road tempts me –  
And the old road tires.

1940

This little poem opposes the patriotic nostalgia that ran through both Britain's war propaganda and the popular poetry of Philip's youth. Unlike Housman's Shropshire lad, he did not long for home, and, much as he loved the earth, he would never be wedded to one particular patch of ground. He had heard a call, and was ready to "wander new ways." But he could not have known how very far from his native Devon these ways would take him.

# PLOUGHING

CHAPTER 2



This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

*It's time the soil was turned*

So this new life began, with its new work. Philip laboured with the men in the fields and vegetable gardens. In spring the tractors ran day and night, ploughing, harrowing, and seeding the spring wheat. Often, the whole community would be called out before breakfast to help harvest vegetables, which had to be picked early to remain fresh for the farmers' market. In autumn, pitching the sheaves into wagons and stacking them in a giant shock was a communal event, as was the day the threshing machine arrived on its round of all the local farms.

Philip loved it all—the seedtime and the harvest—and his poems from this time reflect this newfound joy.

## BREAKFAST SONG

Come let us to the fields away,  
For who would eat must toil,  
And there's no finer work for man,  
Than tilling of the soil.

So let us take a merry plough,  
And turn the mellow soil,  
The land awaits and calls us now,  
And who would eat must toil.

1940



## THE PLOUGH

Now let us take a shining plough  
And hitch a steady team,  
For I have seen the kingfishers  
Go flirting down the stream.  
And sure the Spring is coming in—  
It's time the soil was turned,  
It's time the soil was harrowed down,  
And the couch grass burned.

For we have waited for the chance  
To turn a furrow clean,  
And we have waited for the cry  
Of peewits come to glean.  
Now there's work from dawn 'til sunset,  
For it's time the plough awoke,  
And it's time the air was flavoured  
With the couch fire smoke.

1940

## FINGERPRINTS OF GOD

“Whenever I meet a man,” he said,  
“I look him low, I look him high,  
To see if a certain gleam is born,  
An inner light, deep in the eye,  
The light of eyes that see in growing corn  
Not only grain, not only golden bread,  
But sweet and plain, the fingerprints of God.  
What for a man is it, who cares  
Only for harvest and the threshing feast,  
Sees the reward before the growth of Love,  
Who looks impatient at the slim green spears  
That tremble under grey October skies  
And scorns all but the ripened head?  
God is not seen only at harvest time,  
But he is here, in winter-sleeping sod,  
And half his glory stands about our feet  
In the low lines of green young growing wheat.”

1940

## EXPERIENCE — BEWILDERMENT

I have stood all day on sodden earth,  
Beneath the heavy hand of weeping skies,  
But golden fancies hammered at my brain,  
An endless count of flying wonder-thoughts,  
Pell-mell upon each other, and again  
Forgotten, like the dance of dragonflies.

1940

The community happened to be close to several Royal Air Force bases – obvious targets for bombing raids. The men took turns serving as night watchman for the community.

#### THE END OF THE WATCH

There's a crowing of cocks, and a paling of stars,  
And the hours of the watch are far on;  
There's a flush in the east, and the pipe of a bird,  
And the last of the starlight is gone.

The darkness thins out, and the new world appears.  
The watchman prepares to depart.  
Let him go to his rest with the sun on his face  
And the splendour of stars in his heart.

1940

