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'Clarkson's Farm' made millions aware that British agriculture is at a crossroads. Here's our guide to the best books on what comes next

It's time for the UK to transform agriculture: to achieve levels of food security not contemplated since the Second World War; to capture fast-developing Far Eastern markets in meat and dairy while reducing (for reasons that are medically unclear) the amount of meat and dairy eaten at home; to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050; and to reintroduce the lynx and the wolf. All of this at once, in a manner that won't add a further spike to people's already spiking grocery bills, and preferably before the grain shortages caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine complicate matters still further by lowering the gluten content and hence the quality of a British loaf, not to mention triggering a famine across the whole of North Africa.

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Were all things equal (and they very much aren't), we would still have a crisis on our hands. You only have to look out of the window. Ninety-seven per cent of British wildflower meadows are gone, and we're 44 million individual birds poorer than we were 50 years ago. The UK's flying insect population has declined by about 60 per cent in the past 20 years.

This particular crisis doesn't feel nearly as urgent as it should, thanks to what fisheries scientist Danie Pauy has dubbed "shifting baseline syndrome" - our tendency, when we ask what nature should look like, to imagine a period no more distant than our own childhood.

It takes considerable study and real writerly skill to convey what our land should (or at any rate, could) look like, which is why Isabella Tree's four-year-old book *Wilding* is already a classic, with its talk of species-rich wildflower meadows in every parish and coppiced woods teeming with butterflies. A mere four generations ago, she writes, we knew "rivers swimming with burbot - now extinct in Britain - and eels, and... summer nights peppered with bats and moths and glow-worms". In those days, the muddy North Sea was clear as gin, she says, filtered by oyster beds as large as Wales. "Yet we live in denial of these catastrophic losses."

Since the publication of *Feral* in 2013, campaigning journalist George Monbiot has led calls to rewrite our desertified and sheep-scraped landscape. He calls Britain the most zoophobic nation in Europe, and he may have a point. While even a simple beaver release here can trigger a storm of protest, on the continent reintroduced animals are extending their ranges without trouble or controversy. Bear numbers have doubled. Herds of bison roam Dutch nature reserves. There are wolves again, across mainland Europe (and no, they don't eat people).

Our island hang-ups are historical, according to

Tree. A great many of our national myths are bound up in the idea that human habitations were hewn out of dense woodland in ages past - in other words, we had to make a choice between a productive working landscape or nature, but we couldn't have both.

That just-so story might explain British land use, but it has little to do with the way nature and farming actually work. Tree and the rest of the regenerative farming community argue that traditional farming and forestry practices such as haymaking, poaching and coppicing create multiple habitats, supporting a much greater variety of wildlife than closed-canopy woodland ever could, or did. According to this lobby, what we need is not a return to nature, as such, but a return to actual farming.

What we have now is not farming so much as its massive industrialised cousin: "agricultural production". The supermarkets like it because they can guarantee year-round supplies of entirely uniform

food products. But the price of treating farming as just another financial and engineering challenge, rather than as a biological activity, has been, on the one hand, despoilation and extinction, and on the other, exhausted soils and crippling fertiliser bills.

When barrister Sarah Langford left London and began regenerating 200 acres of Suffolk land - a story told in her new book *Rooted* (Viking, £16.99, out July 7) - she found that 40 per cent of her income was going on artificial fertiliser and sprays, and most of the rest on machinery, diesel and labour. Her few thousand pounds of profit a year is typical for the industry.

Farmers really do live on government subsidies, because actually producing food costs more money than it makes. A third of the country's farmers would be bankrupt without basic payments. What they have been asked to do since the end of the Second World War - overproduce food - is destroying the world, and they are the ones left carrying the can. Farming is bad for the soil, bad for the planet, bad for the climate, bad for our waistlines, bad for our health! Meanwhile, farmers are going to the wall, abandoning the land, and choosing death as a way out of debt: more than one farm worker in the UK takes their own life each week.

Langford's response to this dire state of things - to attempt not just to farm her land, but to regenerate it - sets her at loggerheads with her Uncle Charlie, an experienced Hampshire farmer. The irascible Charlie and his mates ("Nature!" they tease poor Sarah, "NEIGH-CHURE!") form an entertaining and sceptical chorus to Langford's efforts at sustainable farming - a career change she did not plan, but which was

more or less forced on her by a temporary snag in the family finances followed by a whopping fire.

Her book is full of teasing detail, as when, while applying for a five-year Countryside Stewardship scheme, on a form 123 pages long, and referring to a manual 312 pages long, she discovers that she still has to fill in the Basic Payment Scheme form, which has a completely different set of codes for each option. But *Rooted* is more than a memoir; Langford manages to contain and convey the whole scale of the coming agricultural revolution.

Our current food system evolved out of a dangerous assumption that after the world's bounty lay a mere sea voyage away. The Second World War put paid to that fond notion, and the experience of importing 20 million tons of food a year in the teeth of U-boat attacks inspired the 1947 Agriculture Act. Its framework of government subsidies and guaranteed prices may sound a bad idea now; back then, there was an economic recovery to pay for and a food supply to secure.

The Act, and similarly intentioned legislation elsewhere in the world, worked a treat. Langford points out that the first journal article to warn of growing levels of food waste was published in 1980, just 26 years after the abolition of rationing. Today, the world produces 1.7 times as much food as it did in 1960, on about a third of the land. The only problem being, this is more food than we need - enough to feed three billion people who don't exist yet. Globally, we throw away 2½ billion tons of food every year, while eating just 40 per cent of all the food we produce. In the UK, one-third of all fruit and vegetables bound for the supermarkets is rejected.

Those of us who live amidst relative plenty tend to prioritise the environmental issues this raises

over the ones about distribution and equity. But, heaven knows, the environmental issues are serious enough: witness the major declines in more than half our nation's species since 2002. Whoever would have imagined that we would soon risk running out of dormice, or water voles, or hedgehogs?

The overwhelming urban lobby that would blame farming for these ills finds its champion in Monbiot. For them, his latest book, *Regenesi* (Allen Lane, £20, out now), bears good tidings - nothing less than "the beginning of the end of most agriculture".

Monbiot introduces us to a soil bacterium studied by scientists working for Nasa in the 1960s. He explains how, through fermentation, we can cultivate this bacterium. Once dried, it can be turned into a cheap, protein-rich flour. This flour could feed the world, by a process that consumes no more energy than any cash-strapped developing country could afford through solar power, and which requires 17,000 times less land than you'd need to produce the same amount of, say, soya-bean protein.

To the 98½ per cent of us in this country who

have no working connection to the land, Monbiot's Rousseauist future sounds too good to be true. Are things being equal, who wouldn't want to see Britain smothered in wildwood stalked by beavers, bears and pine martens?

But history is not kind to "hero projects" of this sort, and Monbiot's breathless conjurations of the future of the food that would emerge from farming's demise are somewhat disconcerting. A morsel that tastes like seared steak but with the texture of scallops? A mousse that breaks on the tongue like panna cotta but has the flavour of jamon iberico? Are, whipped up in some lab, apparently, by "inventive chefs working with scientists".

Actually, to swap barns for Monbiot's breweries wouldn't be particularly science-fictional: fermentation is a practice that may even be older than farming. But for Monbiot to mix an argument about large-scale untested technologies with a diatribe against Welsh sheep farming (yes, Monbiot is worrying the sheep again) smacks of bad faith.

In his superbly acerbic diary *Land of Milk and Honey* (Quercus, £20, out now), columnist and cattle farmer Jamie Blackett is not out to defend farming as it is (which he frankly considers a nightmare - there is less distance between Blackett and Monbiot than you might expect), but farming as it was practised in his father's day, when, before the topsy-turvy logic of the Common Agricultural Policy, it made sense to mix livestock and arable, and even to focus entirely on livestock and dairy in the UK, where the climate dictates that grass is the best crop to grow (and sometimes the only one).

Blackett, citing the huge margins involved in turning cheap vegetable oils, sugars and carbohydrates into fake meats and fake milk, reckons veganism is the best thing that has happened to the processed food industry since Cadbury's stuck their finger of fudge up at the very concept of the balanced diet. He complains that if British farmers stop being asked to produce meat and milk, "the only solution is to plant the land up with trees and go and do something else for 30 years while they grow" - which is, of course, precisely what Monbiot is advocating in *Regenesi*.

But need the debate about the future of farming be so polarised? The popular response to the television series *Clarkson's Farm* - surely the unlikeliest of vehicles Jeremy Clarkson has ever ridden - suggests

we might not be so short of goodwill, after all. And the legislative framework that's being assembled post-Brexit at least holds out the possibility of real and positive change for the British countryside.

The 2020 Agriculture Act is the largest shift in farm and rural policy since the UK joined the Common Agricultural Policy in 1973. In England, the old subsidy payments will be phased out by 2028, replaced by a new Environmental Land Management scheme that will reward farmers with public money for producing "public goods". Conservation manager Jake Fiennes lists them in *Land Healer* (BBC Books,

£20, out June 23): "Clean, plentiful water, clean air, thriving plants and wildlife, a reduction in and prevention of environmental hazards, adaptation to and mitigation of climate change" and "beauty, heritage and engagement with the environment".

Can this Act change (fast enough for it to matter) a governing culture that has spent three-quarters of a century micromanaging British agriculture into its current, monstrous form? Having been encouraged (and not just encouraged - forced) to squeeze every last calorie they can from their ever-more blighted patrimony, are farmers likely to embrace the government's green new deal?

Blackett is sceptical. "For the past 20 years," he writes, "I have been receiving payments for hedges,

ponds, rushy pasture, water margins, wildflower meadows and winter stubbles. The payments have been miserly, never quite enough to compensate... The final straw came when I was made to keep a diary like a primary-school child. I have come to the conclusion that it is better to farm for maximum profit and use any surplus for conservation on my land than to be a poorly paid serf of the Green State."

For Blackett, whether or not Defra's ideas are wellintentioned is beside the point. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. He'd rather farmers were left alone to exercise their own judgment, and then "there will be more biodiversity, fewer wildfires and less greenhouse gas in consequence, for the benefit of us all".

Oddly - in light of the specious battle lines Monbiot draws between conservationists and working farmers - Blackett's irascible anti-state-interference rhetoric finds a very close echo in *Birds, Beasts and Bedlam* (Chelsea Green, £20, out now), a wonderfully garrulous memoir by Derek Gow, an outspoken champion of rewilding, responsible for the reintroduction of beavers and white storks into the UK. At first glance, Gow comes across as a sort of anti-Blackett, and yet he has nothing but praise for British farmers,

a "hearty culture where if you helped your neighbours, they helped you". This, he reckons, is about as far as you can get "from the egotistical and odd world of nature conservation where big stories were talked and small deeds were done".

Gow's rewilding efforts are frustrated less by farmers (who are a curious bunch at heart, and can follow an argument) than by conversation charities themselves ("small, grey non-entities standing together on a dais"). "If you wish to bludgeon badgers," Gow writes, "a way can be found. If you wish, on the other hand, to restore fading species for nature-conservation purposes, then you have to fill in 90-page documents, which will be thoroughly scrutinised eventually and returned to you with a further suite of impossibly complex questions."

Independent spirits such as Gow and Blackett desperately need a venue in which they can thrash out their opinions and share their knowledge. And it may be that a culture of regenerative farming will encourage that exchange. On Great Farm, in north Norfolk, Fiennes (who is interviewed in today's *Telegraph Magazine*) has made small changes that allow the land to remain in food production, but that also allow nature to thrive. His particular hobby horse is

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the soil, and all the ways he has found to enhance the relationship between his crops and the bacteria and fungi in his soil, to reduce the amount of manure and fertiliser he uses - even while increasing yields.

Fiennes's brand of regenerative farming (and others - there are as many innovative farming techniques as there are innovative farmers) promises to restore crashing mammal, bird and insect populations, make the landscape better able to survive droughts and floods, lock away carbon as organic matter, and still produce high-quality food. The soil science is new (and startling: it turns out that plant roots exude chemicals as nourishment for microbes, and up to 96 per cent of the carbon a plant processes is used to feed soil and fungi). But the takeaway is as old as the hills: rotate your crops, keep the ground covered as much as you can, ensure a mixed environment and a

healthy hedgerow, so your predators cancel out your pests. The detail is fascinating, but at the sharp end of the business, "regenerative farming" is less about having ideas than about ignoring, as far as possible, the present market's more perverse incentives.

Fiennes skewers such absurdities very well. For instance, under the Common Agricultural Policy, farmers were paid to set aside 10 per cent of their land to discourage overproduction. They just needed to keep their land in "agricultural condition". Soon, near-destitute farmers were filling in ponds, ripping out wide hedgerows, straightening the meanders of streams and chopping down woodland so as to turn "permanent ineligible features" into set-aside.

For all the anxiety washing about the agriculture sector, there are signs - strong signs - of promise. We need a decent amount of food security, and we have it; though Britain currently produces only 54 per cent of its own food, the Dimpleby report, the

first independent survey of the British food system in 75 years, suggests that 74 per cent of our food can be sourced at home - a figure considered excellent for food security. We need a sensible tariffsystem to defend

our agricultural sector during its transformation from the CAP's culture of overproduction and set-aside to the provision of public environmental goods. World Trade Organisation rules allow for exactly this. And, funnily enough, farmers know how to farm; at the very worst, the next generation now has reason to remember and learn.

Langford, the novice regenerative farmer, bemoans her feeling "of muddling around in the half-light of knowledge". She sees "how easy it is to think you're doing the right thing while causing harm". Her point is that farming is hard to do. Hard - but not impossible. And it's a task made immeasurably easier once farmers are given the freedom to remember who they are.

We soon risk running out of dormice, water voles and hedgehogs The EU unwittingly incentivised farmers to rip out hedgerows to make more set-aside

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