

CONSERVATION

A magical process

Prince Charles's call to stay close to nature follows a rich tradition of environmental thinking, says **Philip Stott**.

This esteemed journal notwithstanding, one should generally be wary of those who present Nature with a capital N. Such commentators resent the indifference they perceive in the natural world to moral values, preferring to see in nature a reflection of their own persona. They reify and then deify the natural world, and worship it as virtuous.

This is absolutely the tenor of *Harmony*, Prince Charles's call to virtue through humans emulating "the natural order and the rhythm in things". Like others before him, the heir to the British crown — who has long expressed views on the environment, and is a champion of organic and traditional farming methods — wishes to speak on nature's behalf. By taking as our guide the rhythms and patterns that lie within us, he writes, we may build a more durable and pleasant society and acquire deep philosophical insights that are embedded in our traditions.

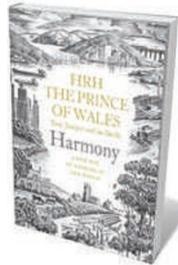
For him, Nature's virtue lies in its ability to replenish itself efficiently and without waste, through cycles that amount to a "magical process". This is a fascinating concept, until one remembers that more than 95 per cent of all life has been discarded on an Earth where volcanoes blow, robins kill robins, forests come and go, and viruses prey on all.

Harmony clearly represents a personal statement by the prince. Although he thanks his co-authors, environmentalist Tony Juniper and radio broadcaster Ian Skelly, many paragraphs open with a resounding "I". Charles's mission is to articulate his belief that our broken connection with nature will drive humanity to oblivion. The cover states that "our disconnection from Nature has contributed to the greatest crisis in the history of mankind".

Such a jeremiad is far from new. The prince is rehearsing environmental themes that have a deep pedigree in European and American thought. The influential Vermont diplomat George Perkins Marsh, an early prophet of environmental concerns who wrote the 1864 masterpiece *Man and Nature*, would immediately recognize its tropes. So too would twentieth-century environmental writers

such as Aldo Leopold, with his land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), and H. J. Massingham with *The Wisdom of the Fields* (1945) — both published in the decade in which the prince was born. Charles would no doubt approve of Massingham's call for a "design for living" and support his conclusion that our "failure is so pronounced that it is dragging Western civilisation nearer and nearer to some fall like Lucifer's".

All of these tracts rest on long-standing European foundations. These include the idea of the 'virtuous rural' expressed in the Roman poet Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, and the concept of the noble savage expounded in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by French essayist Michel de



Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World

HRH THE PRINCE OF WALES WITH TONY JUNIPER AND IAN SKELLY
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Prince Charles advocates a return to the natural order of things.

Montaigne and English poet John Dryden. They also have a basis in German romanticism, including the philosophies of 'the organic' and holism developed in the nineteenth century by, for example, biologist Ernst Haeckel. As one might observe, there is little new under the solar panel.

The benevolent depiction of Nature so admired by the prince is conjured in his own well-meaning image. The cover of the UK edition — a charming set of neopastoralist cameos reminiscent of the inside covers of a classic Rupert Bear Annual — says it all. But for many, Nature is no place to seek an explanation of ethics, virtue or a sense of the numinous. There is little harmony in the modern ecological concepts of disequilibrium and non-equilibrium, which hold imbalance and constant change to be the essential state, nor in a different selection of philosophies and poems. Tennyson's powerful 1849 poem *In Memoriam*, for example, tells of Nature's inherently destructive character: "I care for nothing, all shall go".

The prince muses on issues of long-term concern to him — the threat of global warming, the promise of alternative medicines, the dangers in modern farming, the brutalities of urbanism and, like Massingham, the wisdom of the fields and of the past. There are inconsistencies. For example, the classic doom-laden picture of a tropical forest seemingly laid waste by 'slash and burn' agriculturalists inevitably appears. Yet such interventions can make use of the traditional approaches favoured by the prince — many practitioners of shifting cultivation use field cycles that preserve soils on steep slopes and increase yields. By contrast, some First Nation peoples were highly destructive of their environments, not protective.

Harmony is a mishmash of selected concepts of a reified Nature, rather a lot of mysticism and, admittedly, a selection of sound and welcome practical comments on aspects of farming and urban living. The prince is right to castigate our pollution of the oceans with plastic rubbish. It is surely a sick bird that fouls its own nest. Many will also welcome his support for the conservation of the red squirrel in the United Kingdom.

This attractively produced book may delight and stir those for whom the world has never been modern. For others, it might merit Viscount Castlereagh's acerbic dismissal of Tsar Alexander I's Holy Alliance of 1815: a "piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense". ■

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