

FASCISM & THE FAR RIGHT SERIES



FARMING, FASCISM AND ECOLOGY

A life of Jorian Jenks

Philip M. Coupland

ROUTLEDGE



FARMING, FASCISM AND ECOLOGY

The life of Jorian Jenks (1899–1963) has great potential to upset settled assumptions. Why did a sensitive and intelligent man from a liberal family become a fascist? How did a Blackshirt go green?

The son of an eminent academic, from his childhood onwards Jenks instead longed to farm. Lacking the means to do so, he worked as a farm bailiff and then, in New Zealand, as a government agricultural instructor. Finally, a legacy permitted him to come home and become a tenant farmer. Struggling to survive in the economic depression of the 1930s, he became an author and activist for rural reconstruction. Then, having lost faith in the established parties, he joined the British Union of Fascists. Becoming one of the Blackshirts' leading figures, he was imprisoned without trial during the war. On his release, Jenks returned to the struggle, this time in the cause of ecology, becoming a pioneer of today's organic movement and a founder of the Soil Association.

This book draws on an extensive range of sources, a large proportion of which was previously unseen by historians. For the first time, it portrays the private and public life of this unusual man, revealing many hitherto un-glimpsed facets of Jenks' life.

Philip M. Coupland is a researcher and author. He has published a book on the British churches and European integration, and has written widely on aspects of British interwar fascism.

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Jorian Jenks

To Donna

CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Prologue	1
1 Roots	5
2 Shoots	13
3 Agricultural education	22
4 Wander-Lust	28
5 London interlude	37
6 Superphosphate	42
7 A small legacy	50
8 Devon	60
9 An Interesting South-Coast Farm	67
10 Farming and Money	79
11 Another Cobbett	86
12 The Land and the People	94
13 Pigs and Pen	108

viii Contents

14	A farmer's philosophy	116
15	War	130
16	18B/2732	138
17	J.J. Zeal	148
18	The Rural Reconstruction Association	154
19	Church and Countryside	161
20	Untouchable	170
21	Through the tunnel	175
22	The organic movement	185
23	A young plant of great promise	194
24	Resurrection of the RRA	205
25	The Soil Association	213
26	From the Ground Up	227
27	Rural Economy Ltd	234
28	Feeding the Fifty Million	241
29	The Whole Works	257
30	Return	271
	Epilogue: Jorian Jenks' legacy: Green and Black	286
	<i>Further reading</i>	293
	<i>Index</i>	295

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1.1 Jorian Jenks with his mother Dorothy and sister Barbara, early 1900s	7
1.2 Edward Jenks, ca.1930	7
6.1 Jenks (fourth from the left) outside the Te Kuiti Club, 1927	46
8.1 Jenks, early 1930s	60
8.2 Sophie Chester, with her mother Lydia and brothers Stan and Norman, late 1920s	62
9.1 The farmhouse, Ecclesden Farm, during Jenks tenancy in the 1930s	67
9.2 Jorian, Edward and Oliver Jenks, Ecclesden Farm, ca. mid 1930s	68
9.3 Jenks, Ecclesden Farm, January 1937	70
9.4 Jenks rolling mustard seed, Ecclesden Farm, 1935	71
12.1 <i>The Land and the People</i> (1937)	96
14.1 <i>Spring Comes Again</i> (1939)	117
14.2 Jenks, marching with Mosley (on the left), BUF march, May Day, 1939	123
16.1 Robert Saunders (third from the left). Alexander Raven Thomson, another of Jenks' main collaborators in the fascist movement is also shown, (first from the left). William Joyce, later notorious as 'Lord Haw Haw', is on the right of the photograph; mid 1930s	142
16.2 Derek Stuckey, late 1930s	143

x List of Illustrations

22.1–3	The three men who Jenks credited in 1958 with doing most to shape his ‘present outlook’: Montague Fordham, H.J. Massingham and Laurence Easterbrook	188
23.1	Jorian, Sophie and Patsy Jenks, ca.1940s	200
23.2	Jorian, Oliver and Patsy Jenks, Woolacombe, summer 1946	201
29.1	Jenks and Sally Stuckey, ca.1950s	263
29.2	Esther Browning, with Patsy and Oliver on the back seat, ca.1950s	263
30.1	Jorian Jenks, 1957	272
30.2	Elizabeth Howard, ca.1950s	274

ABBREVIATIONS

AA Archives = Architectural Association School of Architecture Archives

Archit. Assoc. J. = *The Architectural Association Journal*

AERI = Agricultural Economics Research Institute

Archives NZ = Archives New Zealand

Balliol Oxf. = Balliol College, Oxford

BL = British Library, London

BLPES = British Library of Political and Economic Science

Bodl. Oxf. = Bodleian Library, Oxford

BUF = British Union of Fascists

BUQ = *British Union Quarterly*

CCC = Council for the Church and Countryside

CPA = Conservative Party Archives

CUL = Cambridge University Library

Devon RO = Devon Record Office, Exeter

ERC = Economic Reform Club

FFA = Faber and Faber Archive

FOM = Friends of Mosley

FQ = *Fascist Quarterly*

Glos. RO = Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester

Hants. RO = Hampshire Record Office, Winchester

HAU = Harper Adams University

ICF = Industrial Christian Fellowship

KCAC = King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge

KCC = *King Country Chronicle*

KH = Kinship in Husbandry

Lincs. Arch. = Lincolnshire Archives, Lincoln

xii Abbreviations

LPL = Lambeth Palace Library

MB = *Monthly Bulletin*

ME = *Mother Earth*

ML = Mary Langman Papers

NEW = *The New English Weekly*

NFU = National Farmers Union

NZJA = *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*

NLA = National Library of Australia

NUAW = National Union of Agricultural Workers

OUA = Oxford University Archives

Parl. Arch. = Parliamentary Archives of the United Kingdom

RE = *Rural Economy*

RRA = Rural Reconstruction Association

SAA = Soil Association Archive

SLNSW = State Library of New South Wales

StP = Derek Stuckey Papers

TNA: PRO = National Archives of the United Kingdom, Public Record Office,
London

U. Reading, RHC = University of Reading, Rural History Centre

U. Sheffield LSC = University of Sheffield Library Special Collections

U. Sussex = University of Sussex, Brighton

U. Warwick Mod. RC = University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre, Coventry

UM = Union Movement

UMAG = Union Movement Agriculture Group

W. Sussex RO = West Sussex Record Office, Chichester

WT = *Western Times*

WR = *Weekly Review*

Yale U., Beinecke L. = Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

YP = *Yorkshire Post*

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PROLOGUE

In the early 1950s an American visitor wrote of how ‘[w]hen you look at Jorian Jenks you will see why they say that “there will always be an England.” His face is regular-featured, but it breathes a vigorous ruggedness which is British all the way through.’¹ A few years earlier, that prolific elegist of the English rural way of life, H.J. Massingham, described his friend as a ‘yeoman, a member of the rural middle class that formed the first story of the national building’, a representative of a tradition stretching back to the thirteenth century and beyond.² Another colleague, Robert Saunders, who worked with the soil all his life, echoed this, writing that ‘[h]e looked what he had indeed been: a typical Yeoman farmer’.³ Massingham and Saunders were both well qualified to make such an attribution but its truth was not a simple one.

Jenks was English to the core but distant from any yeoman lineage, his background being urban and upper-middle-class. His father was an eminent academic, his mother the daughter of a prominent Liverpool merchant and city father. Jenks was himself an alumnus of Haileybury and Balliol, who spent the first decade of his working life as a government officer in New Zealand. Later he became an articulate voice for the reconstruction of the neglected British countryside and later still for ecology and the early ‘organic’ movement. Even during the 1930s, when he was one of England’s “dirty-boot” farmers’, there was always ink on his fingers besides the mud on his boots.⁴ As well as being a tenant farmer, he was then also an author, the Agricultural Correspondent of *The Yorkshire Post* and a lecturer at the Architectural Association’s *avant-garde* School of Planning.

Despite all this, there were – are – good reasons to identify Jenks with the yeoman farmer, if that figure represents not only a love of husbandry and rural life but also a belief in the possibility of a healthy society rooted in the soil, living in harmony with nature. Despite spending much of the 1920s as an Instructor in Agriculture,

2 Prologue

encouraging farmers to use chemical fertilizers, followed by time at the centre of the new, emerging model of mechanised, large-scale farming, the Agricultural Economics Research Institute at Oxford, he came to work for a different future. Refusing both the depressed rural scene of the interwar years and the empty green factory floor of modern ‘agri-industry’, Jenks spoke for a countryside busy with people at work, amid a patchwork of family farms and self-sufficient villages, of fields of fertile soil, sleek beasts and ripening crops.

Then, to one unorthodox opinion, Jenks added another: in the early 1940s he became one of the little band of prophets and pioneers, who, observing the deserts and dust bowls left by humanity’s rapacious exploitation, and the sick bodies and shallow life of the city, argued for a different way. As a leading member of what became known as the ‘organic movement’ and the Editorial Secretary of its most important body, the Soil Association, Jenks wrote of the deadly futility of the ‘conquest’ of nature and argued that farming and social life generally should instead respect ecology, acknowledging humanity as an integral and dependent part of nature. During the same period he was also a leading figure in Montague Fordham’s Rural Reconstruction Association and – being a Christian by conviction – the Church of England’s Council for the Church and Countryside, established under the authority of Archbishop William Temple in 1943. For the latter, he wrote *The Country Year* (1946) and once spoke alongside John Betjeman on ‘The Survival of England’; for the RRA, he drafted its report *Feeding the Fifty Million* (1955), about, in today’s terms, national food security – a topic of continuing concern.⁵

Following Jenks’ early death in 1963, Donald Wilson described his departed Soil Association colleague as ‘a foundation stone of the Association’; for J.A. Gagliardi, of the New Zealand Organic Compost Society, he was ‘one of the most far-sighted men of this age’; one of Jenks’ mentors, the journalist Laurence Easterbrook, wrote of his friend:

His [...] editorials were invariably first class, clear, well-reasoned and incisive. [...] This gift came to Jorian naturally, and perhaps this is not surprising, for it is allied with good manners and consideration for others. He believed simply and passionately in the things he wrote about and his faith shone out through his work.⁶

These were typical demonstrations of the high esteem in which he was held during his career at the Soil Association. In stark contrast, four decades later, in 2001, Jonathan Dimbleby, then President of the Association, in the foreword of Philip Conford’s history of the organic movement in Britain, described Jenks’ beliefs as ‘foolish and foetid’, the man a ‘fatuous romantic’, a scap among the ‘dirty linen’ of the movement.⁷

Just as Jenks’ ruralist and organic beliefs would make him a heretic from the orthodoxy of ‘agri-industry’, this polite and contemplative Englishman was also politically heterodox, having become a fascist. During the 1930s, having despaired of the established parties, he became a member of Sir Oswald Mosley’s British

Union of Fascists, which, during the war, caused him to be gaoled without trial.⁸ Later, during his service to the Soil Association, he was involved with Mosley's post-war Union Movement.

It is this conjunction of the black and the green that today causes Jenks to be drawn out of historical obscurity, usually to deliver a blow against the environmental movement. At its silliest extreme, this discourse does not blink at accusing 'greens' of being simultaneously 'liberal' and 'fascist'.⁹ But even away from the murky words of climate change deniers, mainstream commentators as politically diverse as, on one hand, Jenny Diski of the *London Review of Books* and Jonathan Meades in *The Observer* and, on the other, Ross Clark and Geoffrey Hollis in *The Times* have employed Jenks in this way.¹⁰ Bringing glee to the enemies of the organic movement and shame and consternation to its friends, Jenks has become either a convenient stick to beat the greens with or an appalling error to be confessed.

For polemical purposes it is enough to state the bald fact of Jenks' politics without further explanation: The word 'fascist' has so many grossly negative connotations, so deeply dyed in by longstanding association, that to attach the word to anyone is to seemingly put them beyond the pale of human sympathy or even, in many cases, honest and rational discussion. Therefore, it is hoped that this book may provide some scope for better comprehending this conjunction of black and green, that many still find unexpected and are poorly equipped to understand. The pages below give as full account as possible, of not only how Jenks became, to use Matt Reed's phrase, a 'rebel for the soil',¹¹ but to chart his personal journey from the liberalism of his upbringing to espouse a British variant of fascism.

Previously, there have been two articles about Jenks and his career is surveyed in Philip Conford's two volumes, which are deservedly regarded as the definitive history of the organic movement in Britain.¹² These works were all necessarily limited in their aims and used only a fraction of the sources employed in this biography. Mention is also often made to Jenks in other scholarly writing on green history and in the ever-growing literature on British fascism. Regrettably even these brief treatments contain many errors of fact and other dubious material, some of which has escaped to spread and mutate across the internet. Although reference has been made to all extant works mentioning Jenks, the account below is based exclusively on primary sources. The following pages draw on extensive material from archives and in private hands around the world, much of which was either previously unseen by researchers or had not been used before in this context.

Notes

- 1 J.I. Rodale, *An Organic Trip to England* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 1954), p. 19.
- 2 H.J. Massingham, 'Introduction', pp. v–xi in Jorian Jenks, *From the Ground Up: An Outline of Real Economy* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1950), p. v.
- 3 Robert Saunders, 'The Dorset Farmer', pp. 21–26 in *Mosley's Blackshirts: The Inside Story of the British Union of Fascists, 1932–1940* (London: Sanctuary Press, 1986), p. 24.

4 Prologue

- 4 'A Countryman's Outlook', *FQ*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (July 1936), pp. 396–404.
- 5 Jorian Jenks, *The Country Year* (London: SPCK, undated; 1946); U. Reading, Rural History Centre, SR CPRE C/1/169/1: Handbill for CCC public meeting held on 28 March 1949; *Feeding the Fifty Million: A Report of the Rural Reconstruction Association Research Committee on the Increase of Agricultural Production* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1955).
- 6 'In Appreciation', *ME*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 1964), pp. 3–4.
- 7 Jonathan Dimbleby, 'Foreword', pp. 11–14, in Philip Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2001), p. 13.
- 8 Founded in 1932 as the British Union of Fascists (BUF), the name of Mosley's movement was later changed to the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists (BUFNS), finally becoming British Union (BU). Excepting quotations, the original form is used throughout the book.
- 9 See, for example, James Delingpole, *The Little Green Book of Eco-Fascism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2013).
- 10 Jenny Diski, 'Short Cuts', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 32, No. 21 (4 November 2010), p. 24; Jonathan Meades, 'You Aren't What You Eat: Fed Up With Gastroculture by Steven Poole – review', *The Observer*, 21 October 2012 (viewed on www.guardian.co.uk, 21 October 2012); Geoffrey Hollis, 'Best not to swallow this stuff', *The Times*, 29 April 2005 (viewed on Lexisnexis.co.uk, 27 March 2010); Ross Clark, 'Thunderer: It's opponents of GM crops who are harming farmers', *The Times*, 26 July 2013 (viewed on www.thetimes.co.uk, 26 July 2013).
- 11 Matthew Reed, *Rebels For The Soil – The Rise of the Global Organic Movement* (London: Earthscan, 2010).
- 12 Peter Wallis, 'Jorian Jenks: A Keeper of the Agrarian Tradition', *Lodestar*, No. 17 (winter 1990/91), pp. 1–14; Richard Moore-Colyer, 'Towards "Mother Earth": Jorian Jenks, Organicism, the Right and the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 2004), pp. 353–371; Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement*; Philip Conford, *The Development of the Organic Network: Linking People and Themes, 1945–95* (Edinburgh: Floris, 2011).