

Two Narratives: Dom Gregory Buisseret and the Liverpool Catholic Land Association.

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In the history of the Distributist movement the contributions of Belloc, Chesterton, McNabb and Gill have all been chronicled, with varying degrees of approval,¹ but a largely neglected chapter is that at the centre of which stands Dom Gregory Buisseret. Buisseret, born in 1886, entered the novitiate at Belmont in 1903 and was ordained priest in 1911. Before working on the mission he served for a period as novice master at Belmont. On the mission he served at St Anne's, Liverpool, and St Benedict's, Hindley before moving to Prior's Wood Farm at Parbold in 1934. He left Parbold at the end of 1940 to return to Belmont, where he was sub-prior and took charge of the abbey farm. In his later years he suffered a number of strokes. He died at Belmont in 1953 aged 66.

Buisseret, a man of strongly expressed views, was clearly not always the easiest person to live with and in his turn he often provoked strong and hostile reactions. This can be illustrated by reading the subtext of his obituary in the *Belmont Magazine*.

Dom Gregory was a man of great energy and forcefulness of character, which came out strongly in all that he did. His robust physical health, which failed him only towards the close of his life, enabled him to perform tasks beneath which men of smaller strength would have given in...

Those who were not put off by a certain ruggedness of manner soon found him an interesting companion and a devoted priest.²

Buisseret from 1933 was the chaplain of the Liverpool Catholic Land Association. In 1934 he became the warden of the training farm, Prior's Wood, Parbold, and the driving force and public voice of the Association. The Liverpool Catholic Land Association, which joined a number of other Catholic back-to-the land ventures, was founded with the enthusiastic support of Archbishop Richard Downey in 1933. Downey wanted to establish a self-supporting training station for agricultural small-holders, which he believed would make some contribution to easing the problem of unemployment in his archdiocese at a time when Britain, particularly the north, was struggling with the effects of the great economic depression of the 1930s.³ By the summer of 1934 the Association was ready to establish a training farm. Buisseret, in October 1934, was released by his abbot to become warden and he moved into Prior's

Wood with the first group of trainees, or as Buisseret called them, landsmen in November. In May 1935 12,000 people came to Prior's Wood for its official opening and blessing. As well as training individuals the Association wanted to take family groups and prepare them to set up smallholdings. The intention was to turn Prior's Wood into a settlement for 20 to 25 families. This was never achieved and by 1937 as rearmament began to provide increasing employment (the government located a number of munitions factories in the North West of England) it became increasingly difficult to recruit men for Prior's Wood. In 1937 also the Durham based, John Bosco scheme to train school leavers for agricultural work was transferred to Prior's Wood. The Association was known as the North of England Catholic Land Association from November 1937, having effectively taken over the Salford diocese's association. From the end of 1938 Prior's Wood was used as a training centre for a small number of young German and Austrian refugees, boys from Jewish families that had converted to Catholicism. Also at the beginning of World War Two in September 1939 the farm became for a short period a reception centre for school children evacuated from Salford. In 1940 Buisseret was recalled to Belmont and the last vestiges of the earlier Distributist ethos disappeared. For its last three years before the Association sold it in 1943, the farm subsisted on Ministry of Agriculture grants paid for the training of boys as farm workers as part of the wartime drive for self-sufficiency in food production.⁴

Historians may have neglected Buisseret's contribution to the Distributist movement but this is not for lack of the necessary raw material. Buisseret left an ample record of his ideas and work. In fact he left two narratives, each with its characteristic voice, of his work at Prior's Wood: a public narrative with a prophetic voice and a private narrative with its much more critical voice. In this paper I intend to let Buisseret speak directly through these two contrasting narratives. The public narrative can be read in a number of Catholic journals of the 1930s, *The Douai Magazine*, *The Tablet* and most notably in *The Cathedral Record*, the official organ of the Archdiocese of Liverpool. Buisseret wrote a monthly column in that journal from 1934 until the merger of the Liverpool Catholic Land Association with the North of England Association at the end of 1937.

The public narrative with its prophetic voice had a number of targets. In the *Douai Magazine* and *The Tablet* Buisseret speaks to his own brethren and to an 'educated' Catholic audience. In the *Cathedral Record* the target audience is a wider one, the

Catholic laity of the Archdiocese of Liverpool on whom Prior's Wood relied for donations and funding. In the public narrative, in which Buisseret displayed considerable skill as a publicist, his tone is at times colloquial but more frequently lyrical; it is almost unremittingly upbeat. What I have called the private narrative can be found in his diary at Belmont. Buisseret seems to have kept a handwritten journal while at Prior's Wood. Back at Belmont he produced a typescript with some additions. This diary was certainly not meant for the general public but possibly, as is the case with many diarists and journal keepers, Buisseret did have one eye on posterity. The voice of the private narrative is sharper and more critical than the public voice. In the diary Buisseret gives his complaints and grievances, if not a free rein, then a much looser one than in the public discourse.⁵ There are certainly discordances between the two narratives but I suggest we can regard each as complementing the other.

If we turn first to the public narrative we find Buisseret in the spring of 1936 in the *Douai Magazine* concerned to explain the rationale for the back-to-the-land movement generally and specifically to promote the Prior's Wood venture.

This Association [Liverpool Catholic Land Association] consists of a number of members who work for the restoration of a sane balance of the population of England by the return from the towns, where they are not wanted, to the countryside which is clamouring for workers. There they are to be encouraged to make their living somewhat on the lines of the continental yeoman who looks first to keeping himself and his family, and secondarily of selling his surplus in the market.⁶

He then goes on to ask,

Where are the Yeomen of England? Their homestead and cottage have long been harried, not by Frenchmen and Dutchmen, but by politicians and such men who for the past two hundred years have stamped out the dignity of the peasant owner and have held him up as an object of ridicule to his countrymen; his muddy boots and gaiters are scorned by a class of men who have been educated to think that labour is only dignified when performed in a collar and tie, striped trousers and thin shoes with pointed toes.⁷

Describing the regime at Prior's Wood he said that in January 1936 there were fourteen men in residence.

The men receive no wages, and any other assistance or 'dole' is refused by the authorities, and so this limits for the present the training to unmarried men. They lead a life somewhat austere with a good deal of hard work, in the hope that ultimately they will be enabled to become self-supporting and independent countrymen.⁸

By the end of the summer of 1934 the Liverpool Catholic Land Association was preparing to open the training farm at Prior's Wood, Parbold. From then until late 1937 Buisseret engaged in a public discourse about his work through the pages of the *Cathedral Record*. In September 1934 he urged that the back-to-the-land movement should not be dismissed out of hand as

...the fad of a few sentimentalists who want us to abolish motorcars and to rub two sticks together whenever we want a light.

The movement offered a practical solution to the problem of unemployment:

Think how many thousands there are who have no idea whether they will be employed next week or any other week, and who have long since decided that no one cares one way or another.

It would be a worthwhile form of Catholic Action⁹ to settle these men and their families on the land, enabling them to be self-supporting and independent. But training was needed. Even poultry farming was beyond the capabilities of the untrained. These men would need to be trained

how to coax mother earth to yield up her treasures, how to take advantage of wind and sun and rain and to care for the various animals that are necessary to the small mixed farm.

The Association would start in a small way. A number of unmarried men would be trained. Only those who were likely to succeed would be accepted. Buisseret announced that he would leave St Benedict's, Hindley and that he had volunteered to 'live rough' and take charge of the farm.¹⁰ He was 'ready to go to Prior's Wood to face there under existing conditions a life of poverty.'¹¹

Buisseret moved into Prior's Wood in November 1934. In 1935 he was able to report '...our feet are on the ground, and please God we shall not look back.' From Prior's

Wood the urban unemployed would 'go out fitted to take over their own small-holding farms and to live a self-respecting, hardworking and independent life.'¹²

The trainees, or, as Buisseret called them, the landsmen, spent the first winter learning farming techniques. Buisseret lamented that the average town dweller thought that all that was needed for successful farming was to put seed into the ground and wait for it to grow. He characterised this attitude as part of the conspiracy to glorify the town at the expense of the countryside. The landsmen, however, had discovered that there was much more to learn about the soil than they had ever imagined. Few townspeople, Buisseret asserted, were able to recognise the different kinds of soil or what crops were suited to each kind. The rules of rotation and correct manuring were a mystery to them. All the necessary techniques had not yet been mastered at Prior's Wood but the winter rains had at least taught the landsmen the need for ditching and digging.¹³

Typical of his upbeat style and tone during these early days at Prior's Wood is his 'dissertation on mud'.

Mud is one of the oldest things upon the earth. In the opening verses of the Book of Genesis we are told that in the very earliest days there was nothing but mud, and then that God divided the land from the sea, so that the dry land appeared; that is exactly what we are doing at the Farm, and you would be surprised to know what funny things we are discovering under the sea of mud. The very first place that we tackled was a hopeless quagmire, but after George had dived below the surface he found that it was really a courtyard, nicely paved and properly drained, and that put a lot of heart into our mud shovelling. Man was made from the mud of the earth, and I suppose that is why we all have a liking for making mud pies...All of this [mud]...we have gathered up and put on the fields where it will do penance and make amends by returning to us in the form of the crops which we are looking forward to gathering in when summer comes.¹⁴

Criticism of his failure to use the correct Lancashire idiom was enthusiastically accepted and exploited by Buisseret.

I have been caught showing my ignorance once more; in the article of last month dealing with our muddy troubles, I spoke of mud when by all the rules of Lancashire farming I should have said 'Slutch', which is a much more beautiful and expressive word.¹⁵

In another typically lyrical passage in the summer of 1935 he enthused,

The work has suddenly become more interesting now that we are in sight of harvesting the crops – so much of the year is spent working and walking by faith with no visible results and then all of a sudden everything seems to spring up from the earth – especially weeds! And all need attending to at the same time: Eh! What's that? What do we need most? Well we must have another horse, and a cow and a lot of paint, and some cement, and various sorts of timber for sheds and repairs...oh and some money, and about a thousand new members.¹⁶

Such lyrical passages punctuated the public narrative, another example of which is his description of the first threshing at Prior's Wood.

The most exciting part of the last month has been the work of threshing the last year's crop of oats...in the old days they threshed by beating the corn with flails on the barn floor, and when the grain was knocked off the ear it was tossed into the air that the chaff might be blown away; there is some uncertainty as to how far the introduction of machinery should be allowed into agriculture, but once you have threshed your own corn, when you see the stream of grain poring out into the sacks all scented and sweet, there is a pride and a thankfulness such as nothing will give. True there is a good deal of noise, the engine thump-thumps, the belts hiss and slither, the sheaves sizzle and swish as they are beaten, the fans hum and buzz, but it is all a nice soothing noise and over it all is the haze of scented dust.¹⁷

In September 1935 Buisseret looked back with pleasure and pride at what had been achieved in less than a year at Prior's Wood. Twenty-seven acres of good oats had been harvested; potatoes, cabbages, peas, beans, turnips, leeks and celery were doing well despite the long spell of dry weather. The young pigs were growing and the cow and the goat were giving milk. The most pleasing aspect of this first year, however, insisted Buisseret, was the impact made on the landmen.

The men who came to Prior's Wood had known the meaning of prolonged unemployment; they had felt the effects of enforced idleness, and had been discouraged by the harshness of their lot. Nothing more than rough quarters and hard work, plenty of it was promised to them. Those who have remained have survived the burden of unaccustomed labour. The work, the air, the food have combined to restore them to health, contentment and self-respect. They are regaining their manhood and their dignity.¹⁸

These men were not prepared to accept a life of unemployment. They had left a life of 'having money without working' and now worked for over twelve hours a day for no

money but only for a high ideal, which placed 'health and happiness above money'. At the end of 1935 Buisseret lyrically and triumphantly trumpeted:

A year ago people were telling us that we would never stick it, for how could we get on without the pictures and no shops and dark muddy lanes, yet we have stuck it and assure you that we would not cross the road to see the average picture, nor would you if you had anything interesting to do, and our mud at any rate is clean mud and we breathe the clean air, dreading the day when we might have to live in a town again.¹⁹

Buisseret contended that the Catholic Land Association had made a serious contribution to the solution of the religious and economic difficulties of the times and had confounded the critics. But the farm was only the first step. The Association aimed to train men for the real object which was to settle families on the land. Buisseret looked forward to the day when the first families were established on the land with a chance of acquiring it as their own. 'On that day we shall proclaim that the baby has come of age.'²⁰

There were never any doubts in Buisseret's mind of the correctness of his policy of settling men on the land. He believed that official findings on the extent of malnutrition as a result of poverty fully supported his case. Good food, he claimed, was more important than good housing but food was being constantly adulterated. His settlement scheme, by which men could grow their own food, had been derided by many critics, who argued that there was already an abundance of food. But there was only abundance for those 'who have money to buy, and even then it is expensive and not always good.' The poor were often half-starved and 'don't eat on Thursday'. If the poor could be placed on the land, working for their own advantage in healthy and profitable employment, it would be a boon to the country.²¹ His ideas, he claimed, which

...used to be considered freakish and impracticable like the need for better and fresher food, for the return to the country of our densely crowded urban population, and for health giving practical work; these are now quite in fashion.²²

However, despite these bullish assertions, Prior's Wood, as with the Catholic back-to-the land movement generally, was running into difficulties. Buisseret firmly placed the blame for this on others. There had been

...a lamentable lack of cooperation between the various centres who all wanted to work for themselves and so we had no less than six Catholic land associations, each with its own training farm, where one association and one farm would have done the work better and would have had a real influence on land settlement.

The government had been criticised for its lack of support for the land movement but Buisseret argued that

... much more marked had been the indifference of the Catholic body as a whole. There is a marked contrast between this and the reception given to the various land schemes started by the Society of Friends; in that body, those who had money or land to spare, gave money or land; those who had influence, either public or private, gave generously; those who had a name or patronage gave it... Among the Catholic body, however, the obscure individuals who started the movement were left in their obscurity by those who could have lent a name and influence, and few came forward to help in the very great outlay of money necessary for land settlement.²³

He made essentially the same point but with a more positive emphasis, in what was effectively the last chapter in his public narrative, when announcing the merger of the Liverpool Association with the North of England in November 1937.

This move towards unity of effort is an important step in the history of the Land Movement, for its is quite clear by this time that most of those who are in a position to give much help are not interested in the work, and although there have been in the past dreams of a Land Association in every diocese, it is shown now by experience that such vigorous action is too good to be true, so let us at least have one strong body, which will get on with the job in hand.²⁴

Generally in the public narrative, however, Buisseret did not express his grievances. Just occasionally, however, in the *Cathedral Record* he let his slip show. In April of 1936 he complained,

How many people are continually coming up to us or writing to tell us how much they enjoy reading about our doings in the *Cathedral Record*, but have never taken to heart our appeals for help in the great work of restoring to our country her great heritage of the solid peasantry without which no nation can be assured of any stability. Do you think that we compose these notes each month just for the fun of it?²⁵

Again, a little irate at criticism of the Prior's Wood venture, he insisted in September 1936

We are succeeding, in a small way, in what we set out to prove- that unemployed townsmen can be trained for land work, with the hope that they will eventually be able to take up their own smallholdings. The work has been difficult for we are constantly hampered by our lack of funds. The government is still prepared to subsidise idleness. For the maintenance and training of the men at the farm we are without the least financial assistance from the Unemployment Assistance Board, or the Land Settlement Association.²⁶

In the private narrative there is considerable criticism of the quality of many of the young men who fetched up at Prior's Wood. In the public narrative there are just hints of this.

That is one of the difficulties of restoring life in the country; there are scores of men who are eager to get back to the land for reasons which arouse our sympathy, but whom it is impossible for us to admit on the farm – men whose health has for some reason broken down and who are advised to get out into the fresh air, or lads who have never had a chance of becoming well-developed; if these could get six months of light work at first with good food and healthy surroundings it would make men of them, and we are often expected to provide this. We would do it willingly if we could afford to do so but for the present we have to think of the bills we have to pay...²⁷

The private narrative, accessed through Buisseret's diary, not only differs in tone when it deals with areas that appear in the public narrative but also covers a number of issues, which do not appear there. The most striking difference in tone between the two narratives is found in Buisseret's description of the trainees, the landsmen. It is clear that many of these were mere boys just out of school.

10 April 1935. Told C. Ware he is useless and must go.

10 July 1935. McVeigh and Johnson left. No idea of work nor desire for it.

16 July 1935. Cullen phoned wanting to return – refused.

3 August 1935. Arrival of H.M. and F.O from St Mary's, Liverpool.

10 September 1935. Return M to his home. Is mentally deficient and upsets the others.

12 September 1935. O is taken away by his mother who resented our complaint that we were not told of his incontinence of urine at night.

1 February 1936. J.D. left. Wants a wage so runs round Wigan with papers.²⁸

Some of the older recruits also failed to come up to Buisseret's exacting standards.

23 July 1935. Arrival of W. B. – ex-soldier and heavyweight army boxing champion. Seems to be a mass of nerves and knows it.

27 September 1935. B. makes botheration and departs before doing harm.

22 February 1936. G.P. left. Had never given reasonable promise of being a farmer, but kept him, hoping for improvement. 30 years old, well-educated but little moral steadiness, cynical, and not too good an example to the young, personally dirty. Of late has been boasting of soon being able to get a good job and unsettling the others, so that I told him to go home as I would waste no more money on him.²⁹

But there were some success stories.

11 May 1936. R V. left to take advanced course at Huyton C.C. Agricultural College.

23 July 1936. Departure of F.H. who has been accepted by the Salesians at Blaisdon Hall Gloucestershire. Later – He did very well and was in charge of the boys' training.

2 December 1936. P.L., a trainee, bought two goats, a pig and potatoes for his intended holding at Prescott.

10 June 1937. J.C. left to study for the priesthood at Osterley.³⁰

On a number of occasions Buisseret comments on the general quality of the recruits.

18 August 1937. Meeting with various people [re] sending boys/young men to Prior's Wood.

21 August 1937. NOTE. In connection with 18 August above I nearly always found that however interested people were, they regarded the farm as a sort of last refuge for any men who were impossible at any sort of job, or wastrel boys.

19 January 1938. The Juvenile Employment Bureau mostly used me for the disposal of mental cases and others whom nobody else would have: this especially applies to Wigan.³¹

Buisseret's resentment of Prior's Wood being used as a dumping ground and his response to such treatment is illustrated by an incident in February 1936.

6 February 1936. Returning found that probation officer of Wallasey had arrived bringing a lad from the police courts and left him here.

7 February 1936. Return to Wallasey of boy as above.³²

The private narrative also presents Buisseret's training regime and methods in a rather different light from that of the public narrative.

9 June 1937. Visit from Inspector of Ministry of Agriculture to inspect suitability of place for training boys as under YMCA scheme for continuation of St John Bosco [scheme] [The Bosco scheme was transferred from Hylton Hall, Durham.] The inspector Captain Shute, sent in an adverse report – was called upon to comment on it. I explained that my scheme trained boys under the conditions in which they would find themselves when placed on a farm, so that placing would be a promotion to them; if I had too much baths and chromium plate at training, the life on the farm would seem a step down rather than up; Ministry seemed surprised at so novel an idea, but after consideration concurred.³³

From late 1938 Prior's Wood was used as reception and training centre for a few German and Austrian Catholic refugees from Jewish conversi families. The majority of these were young boys but there were one or two older refugees. Buisseret's relations with these refugees dominated his diary from late 1938 onwards. He appreciated the contribution and skills of a couple of older men but showed an almost complete lack of empathy with and understanding of the young boys, many from a bourgeois Viennese background who now found themselves in the Spartan isolation of Prior's Wood.

In early October 1938 Buisseret met P.V.A. Reid, a representative of the Catholic Committee for Refugees from Germany, in response to an earlier request from Cardinal Hinsley for Prior's Wood to take some of the refugees. Buisseret did not respond enthusiastically to this suggestion, explaining to Reid that money at Prior's Wood was in short supply and what was available was to be used to train English boys. However, he was assured that government funds were available and agreed to take an older man, Kurt Tauber, at once. He would be followed by a group of fourteen to eighteen year olds.³⁴ Tauber returned to Prior's Wood with Buisseret and in late November was joined by G. Schultz. Schultz had been in England since February 1938 and he was taken on as a 'houseman' but Buisseret found that he was a welder and a 'good general workman'. The first of the German boys arrived on 2 January 1939. On 17 January Reid asked Buisseret to take tens boys as soon as possible to be trained for land work in South America or the British Dominions. Buisseret agreed 'with some misgivings'.³⁵ The refugees' first week at Prior's Wood proved tempestuous.

20 January 1939. Arrival refugees, 5.25. Seem very well fed and lots of luggage of very good quality. Gave them good meal and interviews and press photos.

21 January 1939. Some difficulties already. Find them aggressive and impertinent. Have been spoiled at Felixstowe with nothing to do.

22 January 1939. Sunday. Most of them did not want to get up: three had to be compelled to attend Mass. Violent discussions among themselves in the evening.

23 January 1939. Three of them had to be yanked out of bed by me this morning. They all need discipline. Colm and Gumpowicz are ringleaders. Teufel presents me with a note from his doctor to say that he is unfit for farm work! Write to Reid about the situation.

24. January 1939. This afternoon Gumpowicz says he is ill.

25 January 1939. This morning at 8.00 a.m. several, five or six, refused to go to work. One more said he was ill – headache. They were all sent out for light work and told to keep out of the house – otherwise they all congregated round the kitchen fire and it was impossible to get any cooking done...Asked all whether they were willing to stay and work. All individually answered 'Yes'. When time for work came two, Gumpowicz and Teufel, went for a walk and disappeared. Doors were fastened- it began to snow – soon walkers returned.

26 January 1939. Teufel says he is ill, stays in bed.

27 January 1939. Colm says he is ill and stays in bed except when found wandering about the house.

[Buisseret himself was ill – but]

28 January 1939. Nothing the matter with Teufel and Colm.³⁶

Buisseret had the 'ringleaders' removed.

2 February 1939. By arrangement with Reid Teufel goes to Mr A. Mason of Nottingham.

(Buisseret himself was committed to hospital. He gives no indication in the diary of the nature of his illness.)³⁷

On his return from hospital arrangements were made for Colm and Gumpowicz 'to be removed'. Sadly there was no happy ending for these two young men as Buisseret revealed in a note added at a later date.

They were sent to a house in Southampton and thence to other places; were always unsatisfactory. Finally were sent on the Arandora Star to Canada but on the way they were torpedoed by a German U-boat and drowned.³⁸

The Catholic Committee for German refugees were clearly aware of the problems at Prior's Wood as they had had to arrange the transfer of Teufel, Colm and Gumplowicz. Reid carried out an inspection in late March.

23 March 1939. He interviewed all the refugees and inspected house, farm etc. Wrote out a statement that he was well satisfied with all that he saw and heard and had no suggestions to offer.³⁹

Once war with Germany was declared in September 1939 the refugees at Prior's Wood were faced with another threat, that of internment as 'enemy aliens'. Buisseret attempted to protect them from this fate.

1 November 1939. With Baron [a lay member of the North West Catholic Land Association Committee] Albach and Kaufmann to tribunal at Liverpool presided over by Judge Procter. They were exempted from internment and their status of 'enemy aliens' deleted. They were the only ones liable as being over 16 years of age.⁴⁰

The two boys had expressed the wish to be allowed to attend Wigan Technical College. The Principal agreed that they could; however, they would need money for books. Buisseret was furious that this decision was made without him being consulted and gave a glimpse of the anti-German and anti-foreign feeling prevalent at this stage of the 'phoney war'.

8 November 1939. I got in touch with the aforesaid Principal asking by what right he enters into plans without first consulting me who am in charge of them. I point out that there are numbers of English lads on the farm who will rightly resent privileges being accorded to Germans, which are denied to them, and refuse to have anything to do with case.⁴¹

The respite from internment for the refugees proved relatively short lived.

4 July 1940. Today at 11.20 five German refugees were taken by the police to be interned.⁴²

Two who were under sixteen were left at Prior's Wood.

Another unhappy war related episode at Prior's Wood was the brief stay in the autumn of 1939 of a group of refugees.

1 September 1939. War declared. Arrival of 67 children evacuated from St Peter's school, Salford aged four to seven. The parish priest did not accompany them nor ever showed any interest in their welfare or that of their hosts.

8 September 1939. Much trouble with the evacuated children and their parents who have the idea that they have a right to free entertainment here at all times and arrive in parties from Salford.⁴³

Conspicuously absent from the public discourse is any reference to relations between Buisseret and the local Catholic community in Parbold. The reasons for this omission emerge only too clearly in the private narrative. By November 1935 there was a complete breakdown in relations between Buisseret and the parish priest at Parbold, Fr Aidan Crow,⁴⁴ a fellow Benedictine (but from a different abbey). Crow was also a committee member of the Liverpool Catholic Land Association.

In November 1935 Crow levelled a series of complaints against Buisseret and particularly his alleged mismanagement of Association funds. Buisseret's response was to 'place all books in the hands of the treasurer, J. Brown'.⁴⁵ Crow's attitude was bitterly resented by Buisseret who felt that he had gone out of his way to be cooperative and helpful.

17 December 1935. I have this year supplied every Sunday - or nearly so - for Fr Crow, as well as during his very frequent absences. I have also taken him about a great deal in my car at his request and with promises of reimbursement and pay for petrol etc but so far nothing has come except complaints about me to the Archbishop, my Abbot, and spread of talk about the place injurious to myself and the work - fortunately hardly anyone takes him seriously.⁴⁶

The corrosive relationship between the two men continued throughout 1936.

24 July 1936. Fr Rogerson⁴⁷ - He warns me that Crow is agitating in all sorts of quarters against me.

31 July 1936. To Archbishop ...He tells me Fr Crow has written him complaining of my administration of the farm etc.

8 September 1936. Fr Rogerson called. Fr Crow has written him, also my Abbot, also Archbishop, complaining of unsuitability of myself, Gavin (Secretary) and Brown (Treasurer).

9 September 1936. Phone from Rogerson to say Archbishop intends to ask Fr Crow to resign from the committee. Archbishop advises me to tell this to my Abbot tomorrow.

10 September 1936. To Belmont Conventual Chapter. Told Abbot as above. He then shows me urgent telegrams from Crow calling him at once to Parbold!⁴⁸

The battle between Buisseret and Crow for control over the activities at Prior's Wood was settled in Buisseret's favour.

28 October 1936. A.G.M. Wigan. Fr Crow resigned from the committee.⁴⁹

Although Crow resigned there is no indication of an improvement in relations between the two or that Crow was any better disposed towards the Prior's Wood community. The only other reference to Crow in the diary came in 1939 when Buisseret sought help from Catholic Committee for Refugees for one of the older German refugees, Schultz,

...whose life has been made miserable by Fr Crow who accuses him of spying and rouses village against him.⁵⁰

Neither Buisseret nor Crow emerge with any glory from what was clearly a bruising encounter.⁵¹

Buisseret was recalled to Belmont in 1940. Before he left Prior's Wood, however, he had attempted to repair the crumbling financial position of the farm by mortgaging the property. Eventually in August he was able to record a successful outcome to this quest.

7 August 1940. Letter from Miss H. Lamb, Hayton House, Carlyle – agrees to take mortgage on this property of £3,500 at 4%. We have been talking of it for some time, but I have become so accustomed to those who talk for talking sake, that I have not dared to be optimistic. Went at once and saw Baron (Chairman of the Association).

21 August 1940. Visit from Miss Lamb. Not a chatterer but to the purpose. Went together to see Baron. Arranged loan for £3,5000 to be made on security of a bill of sale on whole property and contents. Interest of 4% together with annual repayment of £100 on capital.

16 September 1940. Miss Lamb reports all funds ready for completion of mortgage.⁵²

At the beginning of September 1940 Buisseret was asked by his abbot to return to Belmont to take over the management of the farm and garden as part of the programme of wartime self-subsistence. Buisseret showed some reluctance to leave Parbold and requested some time to arrange the handover of his work at Prior's Wood.⁵³ A week later he travelled to Sizergh Castle near Kendal to meet Mrs Bower⁵⁴

to discuss the transfer of the John Bosco work from the Ministry of Labour to the Ministry of Agriculture. It was agreed that Mrs Bower would retain control of the Bosco scheme when Buisseret left for Belmont. She would also help in finding a replacement warden.⁵⁵ Buisseret then met Downey at Upholland. Downey hoped that the project would continue and offered to make some suggestions about a new warden.⁵⁶ Mrs Bower suggested that the Salesians be asked to take over Prior's Wood.⁵⁷ In the meantime the abbot asked Buisseret to 'expedite the transfer of my Prior's Wood work.'⁵⁸ By the end of October some progress was reported.

25 October 1940. Fr Gildea from St Vincent's to come to the farm for a trial period.

28 October 1940 Arrival of Gildea – of farming stock – but knows nothing of farming – fifty year old former teacher – student of the Beda College – interested in boys' clubs.

31 October 1940. Gildea returned without committing himself. Seems slightly hostile.

2 November 1940. Receipt of cheque for £3,500 mortgage from Miss Lamb.

7 November 1940. Fr Gildea arrived to stay.

11 November 1940. I leave the farm and take up quarters at Southport from which I help to induct Fr Gildea into the running of the farm. He is not interested in the Catholic Land Association. I think that he will, after a decent interval, consider himself qualified for a parish priest's job for which normally he would have to wait many years as a curate.⁵⁹

With Buisseret's departure the last vestiges of the earlier aspirations of the Catholic Land Association disappeared. Buisseret claimed that the 'work has become a matter of taking as many boys as possible to qualify for the M.O.A. (Ministry of Agriculture) grants.' The supply of boys dried up in 1943 and the farm was sold to a Liverpool caterer for £5,000. When all its debts were paid the Association had a balance of £2,000 for future work.⁶⁰ Buisseret still believed that the ideals of the Association could be revived at the end of the war. In 1945 he floated a scheme to establish a farm close to Prinknash Abbey but, as he confessed, 'Most even of the former advocates were luke-warm.' A series of meetings were held in the summer and autumn of 1945 but nothing came of them. Buisseret's own enthusiasm was undimmed but in September 1945 he suffered the first of a series of strokes and his failing health, (he died in 1953), effectively ended any possibility of reviving the Association's work.⁶¹ The Association remained registered as a Friendly Society until it was officially wound up in 1969.⁶²

Buisseret's two narratives are superficially in sharp contrast to each other. The public narrative, particularly that part of it directed at possible supporters in the Catholic community of the North of England, with its prophetic voice, is unrelentingly positive and upbeat. The private narrative is much more critical and downbeat. Buisseret uses it to express his disappointment and anger at the criticism of others and their failure to support him and the Prior's Wood venture. Certainly it is clear from the private narrative that Buisseret could be difficult to live with and he certainly did not tolerate gladly those whom he saw as fools or knaves. But there is an underlying unity of the two narratives. Each in its different way expresses Buisseret's belief, enthusiasm and commitment to the back-to-the-land ideal. The romantic ideal of turning back the tide of history and of re-establishing a golden age of self-sufficient husbandmen, close to the land and living off the land, may not have been capable of fulfilment and was certainly not established at Prior's Wood. However, Buisseret, and both narratives illustrate this, did believe that, if not a complete answer to the forward charge of industrialisation, the back-to-the-land movement could, for at least a small number of people, alleviate the evils of industrialisation and provide a lifestyle that was more in harmony with nature. Prior's Wood was testimony to his belief that the 'good life' was achievable.

The last word, perhaps, should be Buisseret's from the public narrative in October 1936, ruminating on the expression, 'putting people on the spot'.

The right spot for many thousands of us is the good brown earth which will yield health, wealth, happiness and a blessed independence and freedom to the man or woman who is not afraid of work. Not that we want everybody to go off to the land, nor do we suppose that you will make your fortunes or quick money there, but there are many better gifts of God than fortunes, and one of them is a contented mind and a healthy life. So we are out to put men and women on the right spot, and to take some of the black spots from our cities, and to take some of the spots from their complexions, and do a spot of good to our country.⁶³

¹ For a survey of these see J. Davies, *Back to the Land: From Ditchling to Parbold* (Wigan, 2003)

² *Belmont Abbey School Magazine*, Summer 1953, pp.29-30.

³ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 3, August 1933, p.993.

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- ⁴ J. Davies, 'The Liverpool Catholic Land Association', *North West Catholic History*, XIX (1992) pp.21-46.
- ⁵ Gregory Buisseret, *Diary 1935-1940*, Belmont Abbey.
- ⁶ Gregory Buisseret, 'Catholic Land Association: Back to the Land a practical form of Catholic Action', *Douai Magazine*, Spring 1936, p.6.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* p.8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p.9.
- ⁹ During the 1930s Downey was particularly keen to introduce Catholic Action into his archdiocese. Buisseret, an accomplished publicist, was here tapping into that movement. In the public discourse he frequently refers to support of the Catholic Land Association as a valuable form of Catholic Action.
- ¹⁰ *Cathedral Record*, vol.4, September 1934, p 1357.
- ¹¹ *Cathedral Record*, vol.4, October 1934, p.1400.
- ¹² *Cathedral Record*, vol.5, June 1935, p.1665.
- ¹³ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 5, March 1935, p.1556.
- ¹⁴ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 5, February 1935, p. 1528.
- ¹⁵ *Cathedral Record*, vol.5, March 1935, p.1556.
- ¹⁶ *Cathedral Record*, vol.5, July 1935, p.1688.
- ¹⁷ *Cathedral Record*, vol 6, February 1936, p.23.
- ¹⁸ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 5, September, 1935, p.1750.
- ¹⁹ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 5, January 1936, p. 1878.
- ²⁰ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 5, December, 1935, p.1846
- ²¹ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 6, July 1936, p.184.
- ²² *Cathedral Record*, vol. 7, March 1937, p.54.
- ²³ Gregory Buisseret, 'The Catholic Land Association', *The Tablet*, 14 August 1937, p.223.
- ²⁴ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 7 November 1937, p.311. After November 1937 there were only two further very short, one paragraph long, reports on the North of England Catholic Land Association in December 1937 and January 1938. *Cathedral Record*, vol. 7 December 1937, p. 350, and January 1938, p.382.
- ²⁵ *Cathedral Record*, Vol 6, April 1936, p.88.
- ²⁶ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 6, September 1936, p. 250.
- ²⁷ *Cathedral Record*, vol 7, June 1937, p.151.
- ²⁸ Belmont Abbey Archives, Gregory Buisseret, *Diary 1935-1940*. There are no page numbers in the *Diary*.
- ²⁹ *Diary*, passim.
- ³⁰ *Diary*, passim.
- ³¹ *Diary*, passim.
- ³² *Diary*, passim.
- ³³ *Diary*, 9 June 1937.
- ³⁴ *Diary*, 3 October 1938.
- ³⁵ *Diary*, 7 October 1938, 28 November 1938, 2 January 1939, 17 January 1939.
- ³⁶ *Diary*, passim.
- ³⁷ *Diary*, 2 February 1939.
- ³⁸ *Diary* 15 February 1939. Note. The Arandora Star sailed from Liverpool on 1 July 1940 for Canada with 1,564 German, Austrian and Italian internees. The ship had no escort and on 2 July she was hit by a German torpedo. 445 Italians and 175 Germans were drowned. Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime: Britain 1939-1945* (London, 2004) p. 228.
- ³⁹ *Diary*, 23 March 1939.
- ⁴⁰ *Diary*, 1 November 1939.
- ⁴¹ *Diary*, 8 November 1939.
- ⁴² *Diary*, 4 July 1940.
- ⁴³ *Diary*, 1 and 8 September 1939.
- ⁴⁴ Frederick Aidan Crow, monk of St Laurence, b.1863, ordained 1895, died 1941.
- ⁴⁵ *Diary* 13 November 1935.
- ⁴⁶ *Diary*, 17 December 1935
- ⁴⁷ Rogerson was a committee member of the Association. He was at that time parish priest of St Thomas of Canterbury, Windleshaw, St Helens.
- ⁴⁸ *Diary*, passim.
- ⁴⁹ *Diary*, 28 October 1936
- ⁵⁰ *Diary*, 25 April 1939

⁵¹ We have no account from Crow of the relationship with Buisseret and there is no supporting testimony for either of them in the papers of Archbishop Downey, *Downey Collection*, Liverpool Archdiocesan Archives. Dr Patrick Gavin, the son of the secretary of the Liverpool /North of England Catholic Land Association, informs me that any papers left by his father have been deposited in the *Chesterton Collection* at Plater College, Oxford.

⁵² *Diary*, passim

⁵³ *Diary*, 3 September 1940

⁵⁴ Mrs Henrietta Bower, the patron of the former John Bosco settlement, was a member of the Strickland family of Sizergh Castle.

⁵⁵ *Diary*, 10 September 1940

⁵⁶ *Diary*, 15 September, 1940

⁵⁷ *Diary*, 7 October, 1940

⁵⁸ *Diary*, 2 October, 1940.

⁵⁹ *Diary*, passim. Gildea stayed at Prior's Wood until its closure in 1943. He became the parish priest of Holy Family, Ince Blundell from 1944 until his death in 1948.

⁶⁰ Belmont Abbey Archives, *Diary of Dom Gregory Buisseret*, 1945-1950, p.1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.2 and 4.

⁶² Register of Friendly Societies, London, file number 1175,O.R. *North of England Catholic Land Association*.

⁶³ *Cathedral Record*, vol. 6, October 1936, p.287.