

Extract from “Homage to Gaia” by James Lovelock

I first met Henry Bentinck, the Earl of Portland, in 1991 when I was spending a few weeks at Schumacher College near Totnes in Devon. I was holding forth on Gaia. Henry had chosen to listen to what I had to say, and he quizzed me afterwards, wanting to know how such a view affected our vision of the future. He wanted to know if I had any practical suggestions about how to live with the Earth. It did not take me long to discover that he was someone I could talk to for, in spite of our different backgrounds, we shared in common a serious interest in Green affairs, and soon we became close friends. Henry was one of those rare men who had the courage to admit his mistakes and turn error to advantage, and this requires integrity, not mere obstinate consistency. He thought it right on humanitarian grounds to be a conscientious objector at the start of the last world war, but saw the error of this choice when he came to understand that the Second World War was quite different from the First. He gave up his conscientious objection when he saw that our hard-won civilization was in danger.

In the same way, the enthusiasm we shared for humanism, with its exclusive belief in human rights, changed in the 1960s when we realized that there was more to life on Earth than the welfare of people. Human rights were not enough. We knew that if our grandchildren were to inherit an earth worth living on, the relentless growth of population, and the unending exploitation of the natural world, must cease. I think the fact that he was soon due to take his place among his peers concentrated his mind. He was much concerned about his maiden speech and sought my advice on the science of it. He wanted it to mark a change in the attitude of the second chamber – a change towards a better understanding of the environment. He delivered a radical speech that was refreshingly free of party political dogma. Before he gave it, only one other British politician had spoken clearly and seriously on global environmental affairs, and that was Margaret Thatcher. In her speeches to the Royal Society and to the United Nations Assembly, she was the first to warn of the dangers of global change that loomed in the next century. She predicted that the environment would eventually usurp the political agenda. John Prescott’s splendid speech at the Kyoto conference, nearly ten years later, confirmed her prediction, and our record in environmental affairs. We have been fortunate to have some of the world’s best environmental politicians and it is good to know that Henry was among them. We will always remember the way that he brought life into mere history. On one occasion, Henry told us of his aunt who lived in the Netherlands and who had had the Kaiser to tea one afternoon in 1918, when he was obliged to flee Germany. From his personal tales we began to see why England has such a struggle coming to terms with Europe.

It is unusual to make close friends in the seventh decade. Perhaps our unconscious recognition that it would not be for long made it the more worthwhile. Even so, I wish that we had met earlier. The few glimpses I had of his life in Tasmania and in advertising revealed a man who was much after my own heart in other ways than green politics. Old-fashioned dogma of the Left makes us think of Earls as belted and presiding over thousands of acres of land. In fact Henry and Jenny’s home at Little Cudworthy was comparable with Coombe Mill. He had worked as a BBC producer and had enlivened the words of commercials; I can never now browse the shelves of a supermarket without thinking of Henry’s campaign for ‘Mr Kipling’s exceedingly good cakes’. He had a true feeling for the natural world and was a wonderful

companion to have on a walk through the countryside, someone with whom to share the pleasure of its beauty and the pain of its degradation. He was someone who knew how to be outrageous for a purpose. The Earl of Portland died in 1977. Sandy and I take the gift of these last seven years' acquaintance with Henry and Jenny as something that has enriched our lives. We miss him sorely.