Fiona Provan : Calf at Foot Dairy, by Rob Elliott, 2013
"There are so many praiseworthy aspects to the work that has been done by Fiona in connection with Calf at Foot Dairy that it is difficult to know where to start. But let’s start with the name. Evocative of a time before industrialised dairy production, it tells you much of what you need to know about this little dairy and its herd. It tells you that the person who runs the dairy cares for her animals and their welfare. The clear message in the phrase ‘calf at foot’ is that the calving cows in this herd can keep their calves until weaned – a far cry from what happens to the mercilessly exploited Holstein milk machines that feed the insatiable profit-driven industrial dairy industry.That is not to say, however, that the Calf at Foot Dairy is an exercise in nostalgia or the outcome of a sentimentalised attitude to farming. Though it may seem like the epitome of hobby farming to run a herd of less than ten cows, it is nothing less than the future of farming, a microcosm of the way in which we will need to produce our food in the future, if we are to redress the harm we have done to ourselves, our agricultural land and the ecologies that connect us to that land. Through the scorched earth of a planet brought to the edge of collapse by the insanity of industrialising our food supply, we see the tiny green shoots of change. Fiona, her beautiful Jerseys and the dairy that supplies their milk are part of that necessary change.Yes, but what use is a micro dairy, we might ask? How is that going to feed the world? The answer is that this tiny dairy is a living example of how the ‘world’ will eventually be allowed to feed itself, once all its peoples have reclaimed their right to their own food sovereignty. Over the last hundred years or so, those most keenly interested in the profits to be made from the control of our food supply have purloined the means of production. Wresting it from the hands of thriving rural communities, they forced the rural dispossessed in every country on Earth to seek work in burgeoning cities, decimating the communities that once supported not only those who lived the rural life but also the city dwellers that depended on them.
The result is a global food supply system dominated by a handful of predatory trans-national corporations that put profit before all else, destroying the fertility of the land, poisoning it with unwanted chemicals, killing millions of small creatures along the way and filling retail warehouses with degraded factory-produced food that is very bad for us and dangerously bad for the planet, in more ways than it is possible to discuss here. By comparison, what Fiona is doing at the Calf at Foot Dairy is more than simply the exact opposite of this. It is taking everything farmers used to know innately about good husbandry, adding the lessons learnt from the bad farming practices that have defined the last half a century, thinking with the heart as well as the head and putting before us a small (but perfectly formed) example of how farming should be done.
In defining what she does, Fiona uses the word ‘compassion.’ Some might argue that there is no room for compassion in farming but, quite simply, they are wrong. Though compassion so often takes a back seat in this egotistical age, it is vital as a fundamental idea, not just in farming, but in how we define ourselves in the greater context of life on this planet. Compassion is what will bring us back to our senses.
At the Calf at Foot Dairy, Fiona’s compassion shows us a way to treat animals with respect, to nurture them and to care for the grassland that supports them. The natural source of food for these herbivores results in a natural, nutrient dense food that has helped to sustain our own species for millennia. Milk in this pure natural form is the only kind of milk that ever sustained us, and the only kind that will sustain us today. Commodity milk, that bland, thin, pasteurised, homogenised, standardised apology for real food is, frankly, worthless – as we are now seeing through the increasing numbers of people who have become ‘dairy intolerant.’ As soon as we start to meddle with natural processes, in this case by feeding cows on grain, heat-treating the milk and removing from it the vital nutritional core – the cream – we are creating another non-food. Fiona is doing the opposite.
Fiona is producing a nutritionally vibrant real food that is so full of vitality that it has traditionally been used as a natural medicine. She is doing this whilst putting the welfare of her cows before anything else. Part of that welfare is allowing them the luxury of eating what nature intended – rich pasture. In doing that, she is helping the planet too, because pastureland is a wonderfully effective means of capturing carbon. By contrast, growing grain to feed to cattle is an equally effective way of contributing to our carbon emissions. Fiona’s way of farming requires no chemical fertilisers, pesticides or other poisonous chemicals. Industrial farming pours millions of tonnes of these harmful substances into the ground every year, causing damage that is studiously ignored by governments, the corporate lobby and the mainstream media. We need people like Fiona to show us there is an alternative. She may be running only a micro dairy, but she is flying a very big flag alongside others like her who have the courage to actually do something. Unbeknown to the man in the street, our industrial food system, committed to the most part to the growing of cash crops for the global market, is stretched to breaking point – something else you won’t see in the media or on the Government’s agenda. Just the total dependency of this system on the continuing supply of cheap fossil fuels puts it in jeopardy of predictable collapse within a few decades. The likely model to take the place of this global behemoth is a worldwide localised economy, particularly a localised food economy based on the idea of small-scale mixed farming.
Fiona and her Calf at Foot Dairy are in the vanguard of this change, and it is imperative that we encourage, nurture and protect her efforts to provide high quality nutritious food to her local communities. As the future unfolds, we will need more Fionas, not fewer. Although there is no way to predict accurately when the industrial food system will eventually unravel, we can say with some certainty that it is a truly unsustainable model of food production, and so its eventual demise is guaranteed, one way or another. Does it not make sense to anticipate this inevitability by thinking of ways of securing our own local food sovereignty?
To invest in Fiona and the Calf at Foot Dairy is to invest in something priceless. Small is beautiful, as E F Schumacher pointed out exactly 40 years ago, and the world’s leading thinkers are now finally catching up with that idea. Small is also profitable, in that it can generate a comfortable living and a debt-free life for someone who understands the meaning of the word ‘enough.’ Small is self-contained, local, friendly, community conscious and environmentally sustainable. In Fiona’s case, this is not simply a nebulous concept – she is proving that it can work. Fiona is the future,
and we will all need brave people like her to specialise in the production of nutritious food as a thriving part of our future localised economies".