

ADCO and the case of a patented artificial manure

Tad Brown [University of Cambridge]

ABSTRACT: With the sale of Lawes' Chemical Manure Company, its founder established a trust for the Rothamsted Experimental Station in Harpenden, England. In 1923, two researchers employed at the station patented a method for turning straw into a substitute for farmyard manure. They claimed an invention for recovering nitrogen from soluble solutions through aerobic fermentation. Within a year, the same Rothamsted scientists filed a similar patent on behalf of the Agricultural Developments Company Ltd (ADCO), an organization founded by Rupert Edward Guinness for developing commercial products from scientific research. The scope of this expanded patent included a fertilizer product in addition to the method of manufacture.

ADCO became the trade name for the artificial reagent, a powder which when added to straw and wetted, caused the rapid decomposition of organic waste. In this talk, I consider how the ADCO product came to be—a history based on experimental research for dealing with the dwindling manure supply around London—and its commercial markets, including overseas. I also examine how ADCO compared to the Indore Process attributed to Sir Albert Howard, a leading British figure in the organic agriculture movement, who promoted a two-step composting method devised during his tenure in India. While these alternatives abided by the same scientific principles, their make-up, as well as contexts of invention, differed by a factor of excrement.

CV:

2022 PhD, Law, The University of Queensland
2015 PhD, Anthropology, University of Georgia
2005 BA, History, University of Georgia

E-mail: teb68@cam.ac.uk