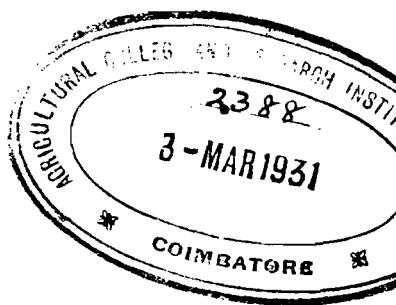


# THE ENGLISH LAND SYSTEM

A SKETCH OF ITS HISTORICAL EVOLUTION  
IN ITS BEARING UPON NATIONAL WEALTH  
AND NATIONAL WELFARE

BY J. A. R. MARRIOTT, M.A.

FELLOW OF WORCESTER COLLEGE, OXFORD  
LECTURER AND TUTOR IN MODERN HISTORY AND ECONOMICS



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## PREFACE

THIS little book is obviously, from one point of view, a *livre de circonstance*; but not entirely so. The historical portions of it are based upon academic lectures; and of the rest the greater part was written before the "Land Campaign" was initiated.

The study of the English Land System may be appropriately approached from many different points of view. It seems, therefore, desirable to define the one from which the following pages have been written. I approach the subject not as a politician, still less as a practical agriculturist, without conscious bias in favour of landlord or tenant, and simply as a student of social and economic history. The roots of the existing system lie deep in the history of the past; and if it be too much to say that the problems by which contemporaries are confronted cannot be understood without a knowledge of historical origins and developments, it will not be denied that such knowledge may contribute to their solution. Still more may it temper the asperities of debate, may assuage the bitterness of party strife, and may remove the whole discussion to a calmer and more scientific atmosphere.

To contribute to this end is the modest purpose of this book. It is based upon a study, not recently nor lightly undertaken, of the best modern authorities, but, except here and there, I do not claim any knowledge of original sources, and, if I did, the parade of the apparatus of research would be inappropriate. My debt to secondary authorities will be apparent, and has, I hope, been fully acknowledged in the notes and brief bibliographies. I have also derived great help from the admirable series of articles which have during recent years been contributed to the *Times*. There is, however, one debt which calls for more specific acknowledgment. It is that to Mr. R. E. Prothero. His *Pioneers and Progress of English Farming* (1888) was, I think, the first book to arouse my interest in this subject, and his contributions to periodical literature and, still more, his recent work on *English Farming Past and Present* (1912) have been of immense assistance to my maturer studies.

Much of this book has already appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*, and to the Editor and Proprietors of that Review I desire to express my sincere thanks for the permission, readily and generously accorded, to reproduce my articles. I ought, however, to add that the articles have been very carefully revised, enlarged, and in part rewritten since their original publication.

My friend the Rev. A. H. Johnson, of All Souls' College, was kind enough to read the first two articles—the substance of Chapters II. and III.—in their original form, and to make a number

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of criticisms and corrections of which I gladly availed myself. Dr. Gilbert Slater also favoured me, very courteously, with various suggestions to which I have given careful consideration. To both these scholars my cordial thanks are due. I have incurred a still heavier obligation to my friend Mr. L. L. Price, Fellow and Treasurer of Oriel College and University Reader in Economic History. Combining, in exceptional degree, historical knowledge and experience in practical administration, he has done me the signal service of carefully revising my proofs, and making many valuable suggestions. The responsibility both for the accuracy of the facts and for any inferences founded upon them is, of course, mine alone, but I owe Mr. Price a debt of gratitude which I am glad to have this opportunity of acknowledging.

J. A. R. MARRIOTT.

WORCESTER COLLEGE,  
OXFORD.



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# THE ENGLISH LAND SYSTEM

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY <sup>1</sup>

#### THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

"Whoever can make two ears of corn or two blades of grass grow where only one grew before, will deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together."—SWIFT.

"BACK to the land." The phrase is on everybody's tongue. It need not, however, be assumed that the frequency with which it is repeated bears any ratio to an intelligent appreciation of its connotation. To some people it means one thing, to some another; to many it signifies nothing except a growl of general discontent with things as they are. There is indeed some

<sup>1</sup> On the subject of this chapter the following authorities may be found useful: Agricultural Statistics (for 1912), Parts I.-V., 6021, 6056, 6272, 6385, 6588. Royal Commission on Agriculture: Final Report, 1898. Annual Report of Small Holdings Commissioners (for 1912), 6770. R. E. Prothero, *English Farming, Past and Present* (1912). H. Rider Haggard, *Rural Denmark and its Lessons* (ed. 1913), and *Rural England*. F. G. Heath, *British Rural Life and Labour*. F. E. Green, *The Awakening of England and The Tyranny of the Countryside*. J. Long, *Making the Most of the Land* (1913). J. Saxon Mills, *England's Foundation: Agriculture and the State*. B. S. Rowntree, *Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium*. A. D. Hall, *Pilgrimage of British Farming*. B. Tollemache, *The Occupying Ownership of Land*. W. Sutherland, *Rural Regeneration in England*. C. Turnor, *Land Problems and National Welfare*. Report of Land Enquiry Committee (unofficial). *The Land Problem* (published by the Land Conference).

danger that the parrot-cry may degenerate into a mere inarticulate shriek. Nevertheless, this much is unquestionable. After a prolonged period of indifference, a vast number of thinking men and all the organised political parties are once more looking to the land; are probing problems of tenure and considering afresh the condition of the greatest of our industries.

For the best part of a century the attention alike of politicians and philanthropists has been directed almost exclusively to various phases of the urban problem. Nor is it difficult to understand and even to justify this concentration. A hundred and twenty years ago town life, as we now understand it, was a new phenomenon in England. The new industrial cities springing up on every side like unhealthy fungi suddenly arrested the attention of statesmen, and compelled them to confront a problem at once novel and perplexing. Almost to the end of the eighteenth century England had continued to be a nation not of shopkeepers, nor of manufacturers, nor of town dwellers, but of farmers, to most of whom the spinning if not the weaving of wool was a bye-industry, carried on by the domestic hearth. The Industrial Revolution, which reached its climax during the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, changed all that. The textile industries were dragged out of farms and cottages into factories; population, which had hitherto been both sparse and scattered, increased rapidly, and as it grew was aggregated into towns. The development was not, and could not have been, foreseen, nor was any provision made for dealing with the new problems to which the new cities and the new industries necessarily gave birth. The attention of the central government was at the moment

concentrated—and rightly—upon the Napoleonic war; local administration, though effective enough for a rural population, could not immediately adapt itself to the new conditions; towns grew up “anyhow”; planning was not thought of; sanitation was unknown. With spiritual destitution the Evangelical movement made a brave effort to cope, but its forces were unequal to the task. For a time, therefore, chaos reigned in the new industrial centres. Gradually, however, in the course of the nineteenth century, something like order was evolved: local government was reorganised; an efficient system of sanitation was devised; relatively healthy dwellings were erected for the poor; an abundant supply of pure water was procured; a network of churches and schools was created; facilities for locomotion and the carriage of goods by rail and road were provided; in short, the amenities of life were brought within the reach alike of the wealthier and the poorer classes. But it cannot be denied that in the provision of all these things exclusive regard was paid to the claims of the cities and to the exigencies of commerce. The manufacturer and the trader, not the agriculturist, dominated the situation, and pressed into their service almost all the intellect and energy, and most of the capital of the nation.

Of late years, however, there has been an unmistakable reaction. Like much else, this reaction received a prodigious impetus from the South African War. A handful of Boer farmers, bred on the veldt, excited the amazement, not to say the admiration, of mankind by holding in check one of the most powerful nations in the world. With this nation of town-dwellers it might have gone ill but for the auxiliaries who

came to her aid from the extremities of the Empire. The lesson was impressive, and it was enforced in other directions. Not only did the military authorities murmur at the physical inadequacy of many of the town-bred recruits. Medical officers added their testimony as to the physical degeneracy and mental deficiency of many of the children in the elementary schools. Alarms were raised as to the increasing dependence of the nation upon imported food: not wheat only, but meat and butter and eggs. Psychologists began to call attention to a change of national temperament; John Bull was no longer easy-going and phlegmatic, but increasingly prone to excitability, nervousness, and restlessness.

The shock to our self-complacency was severe, but it was not unwholesome. We suddenly realised that, unknowingly and unsuspectingly, we had been developing many of the characteristics, physical, economic, psychological, and moral, which throughout history have been proverbially associated with national decadence. In one department, of national activity—not an unimportant one—there was little to complain of. For a century we had concentrated our energies upon money-making, and we had not been disappointed of the appropriate reward.

“Wealthier, wealthier, hour by hour,  
The voice of Britain or a sinking land?”

Such was the bitter lament of Tennyson. But Tennyson never did justice to the cotton-spinners, and was always quick to turn and rend the prophets of the Manchester School. Lancashire is well able to take care of its own reputation. But whatever the merits or demerits of town life, it is undeniable that the towns and their peculiar

problems have monopolised the attention of philanthropists and politicians too long. The turn of the village and the countryside is overdue. It is not, I hope, cynical to suggest that the recognition of this fact has been accelerated by the political enfranchisement of the rural labourers. Between 1832 and 1867 the manufacturers and the shopkeepers had it all their own way. The enfranchisement of the artisans in 1867 still further accentuated the tendency and drew attention still more exclusively to urban affairs. But in the last twenty years the peasantry have become politically articulate, and a shifting in the centre of interest is clearly discernible. The admission of the farm labourer to the parliamentary franchise in 1884; the reorganisation of local government in 1888 and 1894; the rapid decay of agriculture in the 'eighties and 'nineties; the depopulation of the countryside<sup>1</sup>; the steady stream of migration and emigration—all these things began to arrest the attention and engage the sympathy alike of the philanthropist and the economist.

The organised political parties soon followed suit. The machines were set to work to produce agrarian programmes. These were quickly forthcoming, and to-day Tories, Radicals, and Socialists vie with each other in offering to dispense, to all and sundry, the popular and palatable prescriptions which have been compounded by their respective physicians-in-ordinary. To the detached observer the situation does not lack a spice of cynical humour.

From the point of view adopted by the Radical and the Socialist physicians, the case has recently become urgent, if not actually critical. The latter pins his faith to the principle of State ownership

<sup>1</sup> A tendency apparently arrested during the last decade; cf. *infra*, p. 19.

of the land, as of all other means of production. The former desires to ameliorate the lot of the agricultural labourer and the tenant farmer at the expense of the rent-receiving landlord. But what if the rent-receiver were spontaneously to efface himself? It is obvious that nothing would so effectually retard, if not permanently prevent, the realisation of the dreams of both parties as the diffusion of ownership, the multiplication of occupying proprietors. That such a tendency has manifested itself in the last few years is, of course, notorious. A Departmental Committee appointed by Lord Carrington<sup>1</sup> in 1911, under the chairmanship of Lord Haversham, to consider the position of tenant farmers in relation to the sales of estates confirmed the prevailing impression. "The Committee are satisfied," so their Report runs, "that there are an abnormal number of estates being broken up and sold at the present time. The Committee were informed that agricultural land to the value of £1,500,000 was disposed of during 1910, whilst in 1911 the value of the agricultural land sold exceeded £2,000,000. Moreover, there seems every indication that the tendency to break up large agricultural estates is likely to continue."<sup>2</sup> Concurrent testimony is supplied by the transactions registered at the Estate Exchange, from which it appears that between 1908 and 1912 (both years inclusive), 692,848 acres of agricultural land were disposed of in England and Wales.<sup>3</sup> It would probably, therefore, be well within the mark to say that in

<sup>1</sup> Now Marquis of Lincolnshire.

<sup>2</sup> Cd. 6030, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> The Secretary to the Surveyors' Institution, who has courteously supplied me with information, points out that these figures represent only the sales registered at the Estate Exchange, and that many transactions take place of which no official report is received. Probably the total sales would amount to at least 1,200,000 acres.

England and Wales alone, agricultural land valued at over £8,000,000 has changed hands in the last five years.

Many causes have combined to accelerate this striking development. The agricultural outlook has, in the last few years, sensibly improved. Farmers have gradually accommodated themselves to changed conditions. An impression, for which there is substantial warrant, has begun to prevail that the worst is over. The new countries are filling up with extraordinary rapidity, and consequently the pressure of foreign competition has been to an appreciable extent relaxed. Rents, which in the course of the previous thirty years had been reduced by at least 30 per cent., have in the last few years remained tolerably steady.<sup>1</sup> It is not found easy to raise the rent, once reduced, upon a sitting tenant, and in many cases existing rents are well below the real economic level.<sup>2</sup> A new purchaser has not the same scruple as an old landlord, and is willing, therefore, to pay a price which, calculated in terms of the existing rental, seems almost extravagant. Can it be matter for surprise that the old landlords, therefore, should be making haste to sell, more especially in view of recent and portended legislation? Nothing has done more than this to induce the great landowners to "break up" their ancestral estates.

<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to arrive at an exact estimate of agricultural rents. The gross value of lands as revealed by Schedule A of the Income Tax Returns was in 1911-12 £42,000,000, as against £59,311,323 in 1880-1. The net rent "paid by the farmers of Great Britain to landowners other than themselves is about £32,000,000" (*Land Problem*, p. 4). Of this at least 50 per cent., perhaps 70 per cent., should be reckoned not as *rent*, but *interest* on capital actually expended on improvements. The rateable value of agricultural land—exclusive of farm buildings, etc.—was estimated at about £24,000,000 in 1911.

<sup>2</sup> At least 20 per cent., according to a reliable estimate.

To quote once more the Report of the Haversham Committee: "In the opinion of the majority of the witnesses who appeared before the Committee, the increase in the number of agricultural estates which have recently been offered for sale is partly due to a feeling of apprehension among landowners as to the probable tendency of legislation and taxation in regard to land." Whether the feeling of apprehension is well founded or not is a point on which the Committee naturally express no opinion; that it exists is not to be denied. And if the landlord is anxious to sell, the tenant is in many cases willing to buy, if only lest a worse thing should befall him. For the break-up of estates is placing tenants in a cruel dilemma. If they refuse to purchase, they run more than a risk, at the best, of having their rents raised to the true economic level; at the worst, of being evicted from the holding in which most of their capital is embarked, and which is to them not merely a business but a home. In the latter case the tenant may, as the Haversham Committee pointed out, "lose a business connection, such as a milk round, or a market for cheese, for which he may have built up a reputation. He has ascertained by experience the best method of working the farm which he is quitting for another farm, the peculiarities of which he may take years to master. In addition, he may have succeeded in getting together a number of useful farm labourers whom he will not be able to move to his new farm, whilst the greatest difficulty is that experienced by the tenant under present conditions in securing any other holding for occupation."

Suppose, on the contrary, that the tenants decide to purchase. In many, if not most, cases they are treated with the utmost consideration by the selling landlords. The acquisition of their holdings is



facilitated in every way if they are prepared to buy. But not all tenants can or will buy even on the easiest terms which vendors can afford to offer. The "bad times" are recent enough to have made them cautious and even timid. What they would have done in those dark days had it not been for landlords, who practically acted as their bankers, they themselves best know. It is not many farmers who have capital more than sufficient to work their farms, and the last two decades of the nineteenth century seriously depleted any savings they may previously have had. Consequently, if they purchase, they must, under any circumstances, make inroads upon capital vitally necessary to the efficient working of their farms. But not all vendors do or can show to their tenants such consideration as is shown by affluent and generous landlords like the Duke of Bedford, who, in order to encourage the multiplication of yeoman farmers sold to his tenants in Devonshire and Huntingdonshire on very easy terms. The result has been at once socially discouraging and politically instructive. Within five years of the original sale "all the tenant-purchasers of the Devonshire property resold their farms at a profit to persons who re-let them to tenants at rents far above those paid to the Duke."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, on his Huntingdonshire property "a large proportion of the tenant-farmers resold their farms at a profit of £500 to £2,000."<sup>1</sup> Such cases are necessarily rare. In other cases the tenants are compelled to purchase in the open market, and to bid up to a high and even an excessive price in order to avoid the loss and discomfort attendant upon dispossession.

<sup>1</sup> Lord Eversley, who cites these facts (*Times*, September 23rd, 1913), is clearly entitled to use them as an argument against indiscriminate State-aided purchase.

It would seem that, as a class, the tenant farmers—particularly the large farmers on large estates—ask nothing better than to be left as they are. On this point the testimony borne by the Haversham Committee<sup>1</sup> is very striking. "Witnesses before the Committee were practically unanimous in expressing the view that the tenants farming on the large estates of England and Wales desired nothing better than to remain as tenants under their present landlords, and, in view of the remission of rent by landlords in bad seasons, and the execution of repairs and improvements over and above the strictly agricultural requirements of the farms, the position of tenants under good landlords is apparently a satisfactory one."

Meanwhile, the influence of the policy recently adopted by some of the great landlords is extending far beyond the actual area of selling operations. There is a diffused sense of insecurity and anxiety. What tenant farmer is safe? Who knows which will be the next estate to be broken up? To expect that tenant farmers will under these circumstances put the last ounce of labour or capital into their holdings is preposterous. And if they withhold it, the whole community suffers. For it cannot be too soon or too strongly emphasised that a solution of the problem is not sought only in the interests of the parties engaged in production; the question is not concerned only with the equitable distribution of the product between the owner of the soil, the farmer, and the labourer. It is more even than a question of aggregate production. The community at large is vitally interested in the question whether the

<sup>1</sup> The reader may be reminded that this Committee was appointed by a Liberal Minister, presided over by a Liberal Peer, and contained a clear majority of Liberal members.

system is sound both socially and economically, whether it effectively contributes to national welfare as well as to national wealth.

It is, on all hands and by all parties, admitted that the present position is not wholly satisfactory, that reform is demanded, and that the demand must be met promptly.

What, then, are the remedies suggested by the several parties? The main ingredient in the prescription of the Conservative party is State-assisted land purchase. "The keystone of our policy," said Lord Lansdowne, speaking at Matlock on June 21, 1913, "should be to bring about an increase, and if possible a large increase, in the number of persons interested in the land not merely as occupiers but as absolute owners.

. . . We hold that the Government ought to be prepared to advance the whole of the purchase money at the lowest rate at which a Government can afford to lend it." But the policy of the multiplication of cultivating owners is not, in the view of the Conservative party, to stand alone. The younger members of the party in particular have propounded a comprehensive and far-reaching scheme of reform. This includes the establishment of agricultural wages boards as the only practicable means of increasing the wages of rural labourers; the reconstruction of village life in such a way as to provide an economic ladder for the labourer; a sufficient supply of land for allotments, for cottage gardens, and for common cow-pasture; the building of cottages; a reform of rural education, both for children and adults; the extension of the Small Holdings Act of 1908; the development of co-operative and credit banks; the better organisation of markets; the improvement of facilities for transport; the strengthening of the Board

of Agriculture; and the readjustment of local and imperial taxation.<sup>1</sup> But the sheet-anchor of the Tory policy is land purchase.

To this policy the Socialists or Collectivists are opposed root and branch, and quite naturally. To them it appears to be mere tinkering with a great problem; worse than that, its success would oppose an effective and permanent barrier to the realisation of the socialist ideal. Nothing short of State-ownership will satisfy them. The community must, by one means or another (and there is less explicitness as to means than ends), reassert those rights over the "primary sources of production" with which it ought never to have parted. Individual ownership, whether the holdings be large or small, is to them anathema, and to multiply owners is merely to multiply sorrow, to intensify and prolong confusion. The State must become the universal landlord, and the land must be cultivated with a single eye to the advantage of the community as a whole. Whether the actual cultivators are to be tenants farming under the universal landlord, or State employes working under an agricultural civil-service, is a point as yet undecided. The thorough-going and consistent Socialist would pronounce in favour of the latter alternative, since the State would, of course, be the sole employer of labour as well as the universal landlord. The mere land-nationaliser might be content with the former.<sup>2</sup>

Midway between the land-purchase policy favoured by the Tories and the land-nationalisation scheme of the Collectivists is that of the orthodox Liberal party. Of the latter we have now

<sup>1</sup> See *A Unionist Agricultural Policy*, by a Group of Unionists (John Murray, 1913).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of "nationalisation," see chapter vi., *infra*.

had an authorised exposition in the "campaign" speeches of Mr. Lloyd George, briefly but comprehensively endorsed by that of Mr. Asquith himself. Their policy has this much in common with that of the Collectivist—they also look askance at the idea of State-assisted purchase on a large scale. And they have not a little in common, as Mr. George frankly admitted, with that of the more advanced Unionist reformers. The pivot of their policy is fair rent and fixity of tenure for the tenant farmer, combined with a "real living wage," reasonable hours of labour, better housing accommodation, and a more easily graded agricultural ladder for the labourer. "Hours of labour must be so ordered," said Mr. George, "that leisure shall be left him for cultivating his garden. You must secure for him a ladder of progress, something that will give him a prospect. There is the garden, that is the first step. There ought to be an allotment for those who are a little more enterprising. Those who are still more enterprising ought to be able to look forward to a small holding." There is to be a new Ministry of Land, with a body of Commissioners possessing extensive powers, including the power to give compensation for disturbance and to fix fair rents. Cultivators are to have full protection against damage by game. The State is to acquire, at market price, land for houses, allotments, and small holdings; to build cottages; to undertake a great scheme of afforestation. But it is of the essence of their policy that the tenant farmer is to remain a tenant, though his position and that of the labourer are to be improved out of recognition at the expense of the landlord. As to the magic of ownership they are incredulous, and if "ownership" is henceforward to mean the liability to bear every-

body else's burdens, perhaps the incredulity is intelligible.

There is a fourth party whose members are outside the three orthodox tabernacles depicted above. They draw their inspiration from a trans-Atlantic source. The prophet of the sect is Henry George, and the tables of the law are to be found in *Progress and Poverty*. They would solve the land problem and most other problems by the imposition of a tax on land values which should know no limit save that of the economic rent. To the uninitiated it may be a little difficult to distinguish between their solution and that of nationalisation. Mr. Henry George himself indeed wrote: "Anyone can see that to tax land up to its full rental value would amount to precisely the same thing as to formally take possession of it, and then let it out to the highest bidders. . . . The way to make land common property is simply to take rent for the common benefit."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, his disciples—or many of them—decline to be confounded with Socialists, and repudiate the idea of "nationalisation."

It is no part of my immediate purpose to consider the efficacy of any of the prescriptions suggested by the several schools of land reformers, nor to discuss the soundness of the principles upon which they rest. I refer to them merely for the purpose of enforcing my initial proposition that all parties are convinced that the rural problem demands attention, and are busied with schemes for the solution of it. Nor is the land question exclusively a rural one. The difficult problems which arise in connection with urban land, the ascertainment and taxation of "site" values, are outside my present theme, but

<sup>1</sup> *Land and People*, p. 15, and cf. chapter vi., *infra*.

there is one aspect of the question which is germane to it. No one who has any knowledge of the urban wage-earners can fail to have been struck by their "land hunger." It is not that they themselves have any immediate intention of forsaking the factory for the farm, but that they are possessed by an almost pathetic conviction that all social and economic problems would be solved if only the people had "free access to the land." What precisely this phrase connotes may be uncertain; but it is an article of faith with the urban Socialist that a smiling soil at present given over to the game preserver and the golfer has only to be put under the plough to afford remunerative employment to the under-employed of the cities and ample sustenance to the nation at large. The artisan, therefore, enrols himself naturally in the ranks of the agrarian reformers.

In fine, no one is satisfied with things as they are. Is there, indeed, any reason why they should be? Does the existing land-system fulfil any of the criteria which may reasonably be suggested? Is it justified by results?

These questions suggest another which is more fundamental. What are the purposes which a good system of land tenure and of agriculture should subserve? What tests should it satisfy? They may perhaps be roughly formulated as follows. The first is clearly economic. Is the soil of the country put to the best possible use? Is the aggregate yield of produce as good as it might be? Does the land produce food for the people to the utmost of its capacity? In fine, does it contribute all that it might to the wealth of the nation? The second test is social. Does the system of land tenure promote a sound organisation of national life? Does it contribute to the social contentment and general well-being of

those classes of the community which live and labour upon the land? Does it breed and maintain a population, sound in body and mind, and sufficiently numerous to supply the rapid wastage of the great industrial centres? Finally, there is the political criterion. Does the land system increase the stability of the social fabric? Does it buttress the structure of the State?

Is it possible for any candid observer of the English land system to answer these questions, or any of them, with an unqualified affirmative? Consider, in the first place, the political aspect of the problem. It is a matter of common observation that a widely diffused ownership of landed property tends, in almost greater degree than anything else, to political and social stability. Can we count upon this factor in our own country? There has of late years, owing to causes enumerated above, been some slight increase in the number of proprietors,<sup>1</sup> but the proportion of owners to occupiers is still ominously small, though much larger than commonly quoted statistics suggest. Excluding London, the number of landowners in the United Kingdom now exceeds 1,500,000, of whom at least 900,000 own less than one acre apiece. Of estates above 100 acres there are about 61,000.<sup>2</sup> France, on the other hand, has about 5,600,000 landowners, of whom 500,000 own less than 100 acres apiece. Germany has about the same number. Take another point of view. Of the 513,259 agricultural holdings in Great Britain, only about 12 per cent. are cultivated by owners, while 432,042 are rented.

<sup>1</sup> More particularly, of course, in Ireland, where the increase since 1885 amounts to over 300,000 persons [Cd. 4809 and 4849 of 1909].

<sup>2</sup> *The Land Problem*, p. 10. This pamphlet, quoting *Statistical Monograph No. 1*, gives some exceedingly interesting statistics as to values.



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In France, more than half the agricultural population are proprietors. In Ireland, out of 607,960 holdings, 389,751 are cultivated by owners. In the German Empire 92,057,839 acres (or 86·1 per cent.) are cultivated by owners, 13,239,301 by tenants. But the most remarkable figures of all are presented by Denmark. "Sixty or seventy years ago," writes Mr. Christopher Turnor, "the Danish system of land tenure closely resembled ours, but now 82 per cent. of the occupiers own their farms."<sup>1</sup> Of the land of Denmark, 88 per cent. is cultivated by owners. In Bavaria the proportion reaches to 95. That the condition of things revealed by these contrasted figures—whatever the explanation of them—constitutes a serious menace to the stability of the Commonwealth, is a fact which cannot be gainsaid.

The social aspect of the case is not less ominous. Between 1851 and 1901 the population of the United Kingdom increased from 27,390,629 to 41,454,578. During the same period the agricultural population steadily declined. In 1851, in England and Wales, 1,712,739 persons were employed in agriculture; fifty years later the number had fallen to 1,192,167, a decline of over half a million. Of agricultural labourers there were about 220,000 less in 1901 than in 1881.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Land Problems and National Welfare*, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> The figures as given in *The Times* in its admirable series of articles on *The Land and the People* (July 1913), are as follows:

(1) *Number of Persons (Male and Female) engaged in Agriculture in Great Britain, as returned at each Census, 1871 to 1901:*

	1871*	1881	1891	1901
England and Wales . . . .	1,456,971	1,352,389	1,284,981	1,192,167
Scotland . . . . .	254,842	240,131	213,060	204,183
Great Britain . . . . .	1,711,813	1,592,520	1,498,041	1,396,350

\* These figures include "retired."

NOTE.—The above figures include all persons included in the Census group "Agriculture" except female relatives of farmers engaged in

Even more striking, perhaps, is the ratio between persons employed in agriculture and other pursuits. Of "occupied persons," agriculture claims 59·4 per cent. in Italy, 49·8 in Sweden, 48·2 in Denmark, 42·7 in France, 35·2 in Germany, 21·1 in Belgium, and only 8·8 in England and Wales.<sup>1</sup> For the United Kingdom as a whole the figure is 13 per cent., Ireland bringing up the average with a percentage of 44·7. The same truth may be exhibited in a slightly different form. In Great Britain there are only 36 persons employed per 1,000 acres of cultivated area, in Denmark there are 75, in the Netherlands 120, and in Belgium 160.

It may be objected that the conditions vary so much as to render comparison fallacious. In some respects this is true. For example: the percentage of people engaged in agriculture would naturally tend to be in inverse ratio to density of population. But even this does not help us much. The density is greater in Belgium (252 inhabitants per square kilometre) than in England and Wales (239). Yet the percentage of occupied persons employed in agriculture is almost three times as high. Saxony carries a far greater

work on the farm and farmers' sons under 15 years old. The occupation "domestic gardener" is included throughout to obtain comparability.

(2) *Number of Male Shepherds and Farm Labourers\* in Great Britain, as returned at each Census, 1871 to 1901:*

	1871†	1881	1891	1901
England and Wales . . .	922,054	830,452	756,557	609,105
Scotland . . . . .	119,391	102,075	95,470	83,441
Great Britain . . . . .	<u>1,041,445</u>	<u>932,527</u>	<u>852,027</u>	<u>692,546</u>

\* Excluding sons and other relatives of farmers, foremen, bailiffs and grieves.

† The figures include "retired."

NOTE.—In 1901 some wage-earning labourers were returned as "foremen" and are not included in the above table.

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, July 21, 1913.

population (320 per square kilometre), yet even in Saxony agriculture employs 11·5. Most remarkable, as *The Times* points out, is the position of Italy, which, despite a density of 121, can employ 59·4 in agriculture.<sup>1</sup>

For the decline in our agricultural population<sup>2</sup>—a decline, as we have seen, both relative and absolute—many explanations have been offered: the superior attractiveness of urban life to people with a smattering of “bookish” education; the widely and flauntingly advertised advantages to be obtained in the Colonies; the introduction of agricultural machinery; the development of transport facilities; the rapid increase in the amount of imported food-stuffs; and the substitution of pasturage for tillage. That these causes have all been operative is undeniable; and a word or two may be added in demonstration of their influence. Take, for example, the emigration factor. In 1912 no less than 23,000 farmers and labourers, or “about one in every fifty of our male agricultural population,” left the United Kingdom for non-European countries,<sup>3</sup> while for many years past there has been a steady stream of migration from the country villages into the urban districts. Quite amazing, again, has been the increase in the amount of food imports. In the period 1861–5 we imported 34·6 million cwts. of wheat and flour, 1·5 million cwts. of meat, 1·8 of butter and cheese, and 280,000,000 eggs. For the period 1906–10 the corresponding figures are: 113·9 wheat and flour, 18·8 meat, 7·6 butter and cheese,

<sup>1</sup> For a more complete comparison and fuller discussion, cf. *The Times*, July 21, 1913.

<sup>2</sup> The last Census Report (1911), recently published, shows the decline to be arrested. Cf. also Adeane and Savill, *Land Report*, pp. xiv., 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Land Enquiry Report*, p. 31.

and 2,200,000,000 eggs.<sup>1</sup> In view of these figures, it is not surprising that the acreage in England and Wales under wheat should have diminished from 3,438,884 acres in 1871 to 1,842,532 in 1911,<sup>2</sup> nor that, in the same period, the "permanent grass"

<sup>1</sup> The following tables, extracted from *Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium*, by B. S. Rowntree, give in succinct form a comparison between the position of England and her neighbours as regards agricultural imports and exports:

*Net Imports and Exports per Head of Population*

ANNUAL AVERAGES FOR 1901-5

Produce.	United Kingdom.		Belgium.	
	Imports.	Exports.	Imports.	Exports.
	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.
Horses . . . . .	—	—	—	1 8½
Other animals . . . . .	—	—	3 2	—
Meat . . . . .	23 0	—	0 3	—
Butter . . . . .	9 9	—	2 3	—
Cheese . . . . .	3 0	—	2 3	—
Eggs . . . . .	3 0	—	0 7	—
Cereals . . . . .	31 6	—	35 8	—
Fruit . . . . .	2 6	—	—	1 4½
Fruit, exotic . . . . .	3 6	—	7 3	—
Vegetables . . . . .	1 3	—	—	0 8
Potatoes . . . . .	0 10	—	—	—
	78 4	—	45 5	—

Produce.	France.		Germany.		Denmark.	
	Imports.	Exports.	Imports.	Exports.	Imports.	Exports.
	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.
Horses . . . . .	—	0 2	1 5	—	—	5 10
Other animals . . . . .	0 5	—	1 9	—	—	6 9
Meat . . . . .	0 6	—	1 8	—	—	35 0
Butter . . . . .	—	1 0½	—	—	—	46 0
Cheese . . . . .	0 5	—	—	—	—	—
Eggs . . . . .	—	0 3½	1 11	—	—	10 9
Cereals . . . . .	0 10½	—	10 5½	—	28 2	—
Fruit . . . . .	—	—	—	—	—	—
Fruit, exotic . . . . .	4 3	—	0 10½	—	2 8	—
Vegetables . . . . .	—	0 5½	—	—	—	—
Potatoes . . . . .	—	0 6	—	—	0 5	—
	4 0	—	17 11	—	—	73 1

The bottom line gives the net balance, and, as *The Times* remarks, well shows the unique position of the United Kingdom at one end of the scale and of Denmark at the other.

<sup>2</sup> The total decrease in arable land during the same period amounts to no less than 3,607,851 acres—*i.e.* from 14,943,127 to 11,335,276.

should show an increase of nearly 50 per cent. : from 11,376,298 in 1871 to 15,949,603 in 1911. That figures such as these go far to explain the decline in our rural population is sufficiently obvious. But no explanation can dispose of the facts, and the facts cannot fail to inspire mis-giving and disquietude.

The social argument has already merged into the economic. The two cannot indeed be entirely distinguished. But the purely economic aspect of the question is of such transcendent importance that a few words may be added in reply to a reiterated question : Is the soil of this country under-cultivated ? Could it produce, even without recourse to protection against foreign competition, substantially more than it does at present ? On this point there is, as the Land Enquiry Report states,<sup>1</sup> "a general consensus of opinion among large numbers of agriculturists without distinction of party." "Whether tested by its own past or by comparison with other countries, British agriculture is revealed in a state of increasing failure to fulfil its due functions as an industry." Thus wrote *The Times* in bringing to a close the remarkable series of articles to which reference has already been made. One startling fact confronts us at the outset. The yield per cultivated acre in England compares very badly with that obtained by our nearest continental neighbours. In this country the average yield is something less than £4 per acre ; in Germany it is £5 5s. ; in France £5 9s. ; in Denmark just under £6 ; and in Belgium £20. How much above the average the good farmer can get out of the soil may be learnt from Mr. Christopher Turnor, from whom the above figures are quoted. "I have," he writes, "compared 500 acre

<sup>1</sup> P. 230.

farms, as nearly alike as possible in soil, buildings, and market facilities, and I have found the first-class farmer producing perhaps £12 worth of food-stuff per acre—that is the gross yield, the total amount received for stock, corn, etc., derived by the number of acres on the farm; while other farmers, the average men, had very different results to show, £7, £6, £4, and £3 per acre and some even less.”<sup>1</sup>

The Duke of Marlborough declares that on “fair ground” in his own neighbourhood (Oxfordshire) he has seen people who are growing food at the rate of £40 to the acre.<sup>2</sup> Even if it be admitted, as I think it must be, that such an experience is exceptional, there can be no question that there is room for very considerable improvement in the average yield. Experts maintain that the soil of this country could be made to produce twice as much food as it does at present. Whether this could be done without a substantial increase in the *price* (a point which is frequently ignored), I am not personally clear. But even officialdom admits that “*a considerable quantity* of the soil of the country might be made to return twice as much as it does at present.”<sup>3</sup> The words I have italicised materially limit the general conclusion at which less cautious or less responsible enquirers arrive, but it appears to be impossible to rebut the main charge of under-cultivation preferred against the existing system of agriculture in England. On this point the evidence adduced by the Radical Land Enquiry is in complete accord with that of Conservative landlords and impartial experts. The conclusion reached by Mr. Rowland Prothero is as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Turnor, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-64; but see Note, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *The Land*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Annual Report on Small Holdings, 1910.

"Much ought to be done, which is left undone, to put land to its most profitable use and to adapt its equipment to the requirements of diversified farming. . . . The modern system of farming has broken down in one of its most essential features. . . . Prolonged depression compelled landlords to practise economies themselves and to acquiesce in the economies of their tenants. The land has suffered and is still suffering. Thousands of acres of tillage and grass land are comparatively wasted, underfarmed and undermanned." There is no higher authority than Mr. Prothero, and his words will be endorsed by men of all parties.

No such unanimity is to be expected or found when we pass from the facts to the explanation of them. By some it is attributed primarily to the system of land tenure, to the growth of great landlords and the lack of security for tenants; by others to lack of capital and credit facilities; by others again to lack of scientific education, or to the reluctance of British farmers to organise their industries on a co-operative basis. Some lay the responsibility on the game preserves, and declare that the peasants are sacrificed to the pheasants. Others blame the railway companies and complain of preferential rates. Some demand the readjustment of taxation, others the imposition of a tariff. But neither with explanations nor remedies are we for the moment concerned. The facts are not in dispute. Nobody is prepared to maintain that the present system reacts satisfactorily to any of the tests which may legitimately be applied. Neither politically, socially, nor economically can the results secured be regarded as adequate.

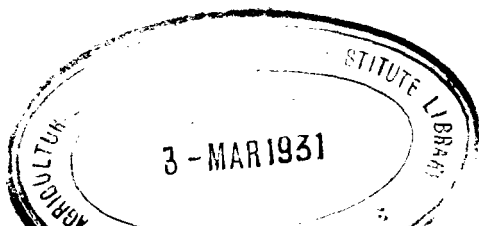
Is the system likely to survive the convergent assaults from so many diverse quarters?

A few years ago the tripartite division of the

agricultural population—landlord, tenant farmer, and landless labourer—was popularly supposed to rest, if not upon an ordinance from Heaven, at least upon the sanction of immemorial antiquity. A very slight acquaintance with the records of the past sufficed to show that whatever the expediency of the existing system, it could not claim the reverence due to age. The English land system is indeed in its entirety not much more than a century old. No sooner was this generally realised than people rushed to the conclusion—equally erroneous—that it was the result of a recent and gigantic expropriation of the sons of the soil on the part of a new race of capitalistic landlords.

It may, perhaps, serve to put the whole problem in less distorted perspective and transfer the controversy to a less heated atmosphere if we sketch briefly the process by which the present has come to be. Such is the modest purpose of the pages that follow.

*NOTE.*—And while these pages were passing through the press there appeared *Land and the Politicians*, by H. Grisewood and E. Robins (Duckworth & Co., 1914). In chapter vii. of this admirable booklet the writers discuss the question of "under-cultivation" with a closeness of argument and wealth of statistical illustration which I have not seen equalled. Their conclusion is that in this matter the detractors of England are guilty of exaggeration, and that English farming will bear comparison with the best. The cogency of the argument compels a doubt whether I am justified in subscription to the contrary opinions recorded above.





## CHAPTER II

### THE ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH LAND SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

#### § I. THE MANORIAL SYSTEM

"The fundamental characteristic of the manorial group, regarded from the economic point of view, was its self-sufficiency, its social independence. . . . Thus the inhabitants of an average English village went on—year in, year out—with the same customary methods of cultivation, living on what they produced, and scarcely coming in contact with the outside world."—ASHLEY.

In the history of English agriculture and land tenure there have been three critical epochs: the latter half of the fourteenth century; the sixteenth century, and the century which intervened between 1760 and 1860. To those epochs we may ascribe the delineation of the main features of the system as it is familiar to us to-day. The first witnessed the dissolution of the manorial economy, and the beginning of the divorce of the peasantry from the soil they tilled; the second saw the conversion of England, or some parts of it, into a sheep walk; the third was noteworthy for the final extinction of the common-field system of cultivation, for the triumph of enclosures, the disappearance of the yeoman, and the emergence of the modern agricultural hierarchy. The present chapter is concerned with the first of these periods.

<sup>1</sup> For list of authorities see p. 32.

A sketch of the English land system—however slight—must begin with some account of the organisation of the mediæval manor. For four centuries at least—from the eleventh century to the fourteenth—the soil of rural England was occupied by a continuous series of agricultural communities known by the Norman name of *manors*. Between manor and manor there were infinite varieties of detail; hardly any two manors indeed were precisely alike, but nevertheless they all conformed, in their outstanding features, to a common type. This type we must be at some pains to realise.

The first essential to a comprehension of the characteristic features of the manorial economy is to put out of mind those which distinguish the rural communities of modern England. The typical village street of to-day is, indeed, commonly enough, a survival of manorial times. But in those days the street contained the dwellings of all the members of the village community except the lord and his immediate dependants and the parish priest. The modern hierarchy of landlord, tenant farmers, and labourers was unknown. There was indeed a lord, but he was not in the modern sense a landlord. Of compact, self-contained farms, cultivated by tenant farmers, there were none; while of labourers, landless and living on money wages, there were very few. Nor was the manner and method of cultivation left to the caprice of the individual cultivator. Every member of the manorial group had to conform to rigid rules, and to cultivate his land on a prescribed plan. The manor was indeed not a mere aggregation of individuals but a *community*, living not on detached holdings but side by side, working not in isolation but according to a common and coherent scheme.

The various classes of the community and the plan of their work must be described in something more of detail.

The property of the manor was vested in a *lord*, who held it either from the King himself, or from some intermediate lord, to whom various services, chiefly of a military character, were owed. The lord might be the holder of one manor or of many. Besides the lord and the parish priest, there were in every manor three principal officials: the *steward* or seneschal, whose duty it was to represent the lord in the courts of the manor; the *bailiff*, who looked after the agricultural interests of the lord, more particularly the cultivation of the demesne; and the *reeve*, who represented and was chosen by the villagers, and who was responsible to the lord for the due performance of the various services owed by the villagers.

Most manors, but not all, contained a certain number of *freeholders*, holding from the lord, sometimes by "knight service," and sometimes by free socage tenure. They were all subject to the *soc* or jurisdiction of the lord, and paid for their land, besides military service, a fixed rent in money, kind, or more rarely in labour. Taking the 9,250 manors surveyed in Domesday as a whole, these freeholders averaged only about 4 per cent. of the inhabitants, though in the eastern counties, where there was a large infusion of Danes, they constituted a far larger proportion of the manorial population. At the opposite extreme of the social hierarchy were the *slaves*, who constituted only some 9 per cent. of the Domesday population, though the counties on the Welsh borders and in the south-west yielded a much higher proportion. The mass of the inhabitants were either *villeins* or *bordars* or *cottars*. Between them these latter classes

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supplied 70 per cent. of the population. Besides his cottage in the village street, generally with a small patch of land known as a *close* or *toft* round it, every villein held a *virgate* or half virgate of land, and was the possessor of one or two oxen, and a right to a share of the use of the common ploughs. The *virgate* or *yardland* or *yoke*, consisted generally of thirty acres of arable land, together with proportionate rights in the meadow and pasture of the manor. The owner of a pair of oxen seems to have been entitled to a whole virgate; the owner of one ox only to a half virgate. Below the villeins, but superior to the slaves, were the *bordars* or *cottars*, who held from one to ten acres, and were distinguished from the full villeins not only by the smaller size of their holdings, but specifically by the fact that they possessed neither oxen nor any share in the co-operative ploughs.

The land of the manor was divided, in a tenurial sense, into two parts. Something less than half consisted of *demesne*—the lord's land or "inland"; rather more than half was "outland"—mostly *villenagium*. In an agricultural sense the land was divided into four categories: the arable, the meadows, the permanent pasture, and the wood and waste. Besides these there were on many manors "closes" or enclosed meadows, held by the lord himself, or let in severalty to individual tenants.

The arable land lay in great open fields, of which there were sometimes only two, occasionally as many as four, but almost invariably three. Each of the three fields was further divided into acre or half-acre strips, separated from each other only by grass balks. On some manors the lord's portion or demesne was consolidated, just like a modern farm; on others it was distributed in

strips among the common fields. The villeins' holdings were invariably distributed between the three fields, and frequently it happened that no two contiguous strips belonged to the same cultivator. A most elaborate code of rules governed the course of cultivation. Of the three arable fields one lay fallow every year, one was sown with wheat, and one with oats or beans. Only until these crops were gathered were the strips held in severalty; after harvest the beasts were turned in to graze on the stubble. Similarly with the meadows. These also were apportioned among the villagers, according to the extent of their arable holdings, until hay harvest, after which they were grazed in common. On the permanent pastures the tenants could graze cattle, sheep, and swine "with or without stint"; they also had grazing and turbary rights in the "waste," and rights of "pannage" and fuel-getting in the "wood." The extent of these further rights was, as a rule, determined by the extent of their holdings in the common arable fields.

The cultivation of the demesne was done partly by hired labour, to some small extent by slaves, but mainly by the villeins, cottars, and bordars, under the superintendence of the bailiff and the reeve. The villeins owed to the lord two kinds of service: "week work," *i.e.* regular work so many days a week all the year round; and "boon work," or *precariæ*, *i.e.* special services at busy seasons of the year, such as the autumnal, Lenten, and summer ploughing, harvest time, and sowing season (August 12—November 1). It was the duty of the villeins to supply ox-teams and plough, and to perform a number of miscellaneous services, such as carting. But the lord's live-stock was tended by a large staff of permanent agricultural servants, such as the waggoner, the

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oxherd, the cowherd, the shepherd, the swineherd, and the warrener. The wages of these labourers were paid, as a rule, in kind. There was, indeed, very little money or other medium of exchange in a mediæval manor. Nor was it needed. Except in manors contiguous to a town, there was very little external trade or interchange of commodities. Mill-stones, salt, iron, steel, tar, and canvas were the most important of the articles which every manor had to import. These were paid for by exports of live stock and surplus agricultural produce. But the surplus was, as a rule, scanty. For the most part each manor was economically independent, isolated, and self-sufficing. This was, indeed, the distinguishing characteristic of the manorial economy. Nor did the internal transactions demand a monetary medium. The services rendered to the lord by the villeins were remunerated by land; the rent payable by the villeins to the lord was discharged in labour.

The question is often asked: "How did the position of a villein compare with that of a modern labourer? It is not easy to answer it; for the position of a villein was midway between that of the farmer and the labourer in the modern agricultural economy. In one sense it was better even than that of the tenant farmer. So long as his services were duly rendered to the lord, the villein had absolute security of tenure. The lord himself was the "proprietor" of the manor only so long as he could and did discharge the services in virtue of which he held it from the king or an intermediate "tenant." *Mutatis mutandis*, it was the same with the villein. Tied as he was to the soil, the soil was tied to him. In respect, then, of personal independence the villein's position was inferior to that of a modern

labourer; in regard to fixity of tenure it was superior to that of a tenant farmer. His rights, it is true, were based upon custom rather than upon law; but they were not, upon that account, in practice, less valid or effective. The life of the villein was laborious and monotonous; his fare, at any rate in winter, must have been scanty; and, unless he could get ordained or secure an apprenticeship, his prospects of advancement were dim; but, on the other hand, when victuals were abundant he had his share of them; in any case, he had no fear of starvation nor of the workhouse in old age, and he was secure against unemployment or arbitrary ejection from his holding or his home.

Such, in briefest and broadest outline, were the main features, social and economic, of the manorial system—a system which dominated the rural life of England for at least four centuries. During the course of those centuries several significant changes, as we shall see, were registered, affecting more particularly the mutual relations of lords and villeins; but the system itself remained intact. Even after the dissolution of the manor as a social and judicial unit, many of its characteristic agricultural features survived, some of them—such as the open-field arable cultivation—until towards the end of the eighteenth century.

But at this point, two questions naturally present themselves. How had the manorial system arisen? When and why did it disappear?

The two questions are obviously of very different degrees of immediate significance. The former is mainly academic and antiquarian, and may be briefly dismissed; the latter has a real bearing upon current controversies, and cannot be so lightly regarded.

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The former question may be stated crudely thus: did the village community of the Middle Ages originate in freedom or slavery? Does the manorial system, as described above, represent a progressive degeneration from the free "mark" of our Teutonic ancestors? Or does it supply the middle stage in the upward development from slavery to freedom? In a word, is the origin of the manor to be sought in the Roman *villa*, slave-worked and lord-ruled, or in the free, self-governing, and common-cultivating community described by the writers of the "Teutonic" school?<sup>1</sup>

Until some thirty years ago most English historians accepted, in comfortable assurance of finality, the conclusion, in this as in other matters, of the "Teutonic" school, who regarded the *mark* as the original basis on which all Teutonic society rests (Kemble). By the *mark*, Maurer, Kemble, and their disciples understood "a voluntary association of freemen" governing themselves, acknowledging no superior or lord, owning and cultivating the land of the village in common. The system is thus described in a classical

<sup>1</sup> On the whole controversy cf. Kemble, *Saxons in England* (1848); George Von Maurer, *Einleitung zur Geschichte der Mark-Verfassung* (1854); Nasse, *The Agricultural Community of the Middle Ages* (Eng. trans. 1871); Sir H. Maine, *Village Communities* (1871); W. Stubbs, *Constitutional History of England* (1873); J. R. Green, *The Making of England* (1881); F. W. Maitland, *Domesday and Beyond* (1897); P. Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England* (1892); *The Growth of the Manor* (1905); *English Society in the Eleventh Century* (1908). The above accept, in varying degrees, the Teutonic view. On the other side cf. F. Seebohm, *English Village Community* (1883); Fustel de Coulanges, *Recherches sur quelques Problèmes d'Histoire* (1885); W. J. Ashley, *Economic History*, vol. i. (1888); Coulanges, *Origin of Property in Land* (Eng. trans. with introduction by W. J. Ashley) (1891); and others. Cf. also C. M. Andrews, *Old English Manor* (1892); E. A. Bryan, *The Mark in Europe and America*, (1893); Petit-Dutaillis, *Studies Supplementary to Stubbs* (trans. W. E. Rhodes) (1908); E. C. K. Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure* (1912).



passage by Bishop Stubbs: "The general name of the *mark* is given to the territory which is held by the community, the absolute ownership of which resides in the community itself, or in the tribe or nation of which the community forms a part. The *mark* has been formed by a primitive settlement of a family or kindred. . . . In the centre of the clearing the primitive village is placed: each of the mark-men has there his house, courtyard, and farm-buildings. This possession, the exponent as we may call it of his character as a fully qualified freeman, entitles him to a share in the land of the community. He has a right to the enjoyment of the woods, the pastures, the meadow, and the arable land of the *mark*; but the right is of the nature of usufruct or possession only, his only title to absolute ownership being merged in the general title of the tribe which he of course shares."<sup>1</sup>

This, it was maintained, was the normal type of agricultural community among our Teutonic ancestors, both before and after the migration to Britain. It was, indeed, conceded that from the first there would be variations from the normal type. Here and there one of the greater warriors would organise a community with semi-servile cultivators on manorial lines. But the free, self-governing community was, it was argued, the rule.

To this theory two violent and almost simultaneous shocks were administered about thirty years ago. In 1883 Mr. Frederick Seebohm published his great work on *The English Village Community*. Two years later M. Fustel de Coulanges published his *Recherches sur quelques Problèmes d'Histoire*. In the latter Coulanges roundly declared that the whole theory of the *mark* was a "figment of the Teutonic brain,"

<sup>1</sup> *Constitutional History*, vol. i. p. 49.

while Mr. Seebohm contended that "English history begins with the serfdom of the masses of the rural population . . .—a serfdom from which it has taken a thousand years to set them free." His argument, which is pre-eminently logical, may be summarised as follows: The Roman provincial system—the *villa*—was practically "manorial"; from the Romans the Romanised Teutons of south-eastern Britain<sup>1</sup> derived it, and they, in their turn, handed on the system to their un-Romanised kinsmen from north Germany. Consequently, the Anglo-Saxon invaders found in Britain and adopted the "three-field system," which, though unknown in north Germany, was common in the Romanised south. That our Teutonic ancestors could have introduced a system with which they were themselves unacquainted is inconceivable, and the village community subsequently developed on English soil must, therefore, have survived from the days of the Roman occupation! The argument is plausible, but it is not conclusive. Nor does it exhaust the alternatives.

It is not denied—at any rate by the more cautious investigators—that there were, from the first, *some* village communities dependent upon a "lord," cultivated by semi-servile labour, and to all intents and purposes "manors." Nor is it denied that between the Roman *villa* and the Norman *manor* there is a close analogy. But analogy does not prove derivation. Further: both Seebohm and Coulanges appear to concentrate their attention too exclusively upon the economic aspect; upon the question of land tenure and the details of agricultural organisation. If

<sup>1</sup> *I.e.* the Teutons of "the Saxon Shore," who according to Seebohm, Coote, and others, settled in Britain long before the main Teutonic immigration of the fifth century.

their theory be accepted ; if the normal type of village community consisted of a body of slaves under a lord, it is difficult to see what room is left for the freeman of the *Germania*, the freeman with equal political rights : the right of assembly, of electing the *princeps*, of deciding on judicial questions, and so forth. That the Roman *villa* supplied the economic mould ; that the manorial system of cultivation descended by unbroken tradition to the Teutonic immigrants, seems to me probable ; but that our Frisian forefathers poured into the economic mould their free political organisation seems equally so. The question cannot be further discussed here. One of the latest and most trustworthy experts has expressed his conviction that "the communal organisation of the [English] peasantry is more ancient and more deeply laid than the manorial order. Even the feudal period shows everywhere traces of a peasant class living and working in economically self-dependent communities under the loose authority of a lord whose claims may proceed from political causes and affect the semblance of ownership, but do not give rise to the manorial connection between estate and village."<sup>1</sup>

At this we must leave it. The question of origin is of undeniable interest to the academic investigator. But the significance of the answer is antiquarian rather than political.

It is otherwise with the second of the two questions proposed above. When and why did the manorial system come to an end ? Was its dissolution brought about or accelerated by the "act of God," or was it due to the malice of man ? Was it the result of the operation of economic

<sup>1</sup> Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England*, p. 409. The Corpus Professor attempts to penetrate to pre-Roman influences, but in so slight a sketch I cannot pretend to explore these remote regions.

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forces, or did social and political motives combine to hasten it? Was it the outcome of a sudden and catastrophic dislocation of the labour market in the middle of the fourteenth century? Or was it the inevitable result of slow but gradual pressure exerted without observation but without remission throughout the course of centuries? Did the manorial economy break up in consequence of the deliberate action or the recklessness of the peasant cultivators? Were the villeins consumed with anxiety to escape from bondage at the first opportunity? Did they voluntarily abandon holdings of which they were virtually owners though nominally tenants? Or were they forcibly evicted? In short, were the villein holdings deserted by the cultivators or were they enclosed and consolidated to satisfy the economic cupidity or minister to the social ambition of a self-seeking aristocracy?

It is obvious that these questions are still calculated to arouse not merely scientific controversy but political passion.

What are the true historical answers?

### § 2. THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Black Death and the Peasant Revolt*

"Seeing that a great part of the people, and principally of labourers and servants, is dead of the plague, and that some, seeing the necessity of masters and the scarcity of servants, will not work unless they receive exorbitant wages, and others choosing rather to beg in idleness than to earn their bread by labour. We, considering the grievous discommodity which of the lack of ploughmen and labourers may hereafter come have . . . ordained . . . that every able-bodied man and woman of our kingdom, bond or free, under sixty years of age, not living by trading, or having of his or her own wherewithall to live . . . shall, if so

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<sup>1</sup> In connection with the subject of this section the following books, in addition to those already cited, will be found useful: F. A. Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence*. A. Jessop, *The Coming of the Friars*. C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*. G. M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wyclif*. Creighton, *Epidemics*. *Fortnightly Review*, vols. ii., iii., iv. Powell, *East Anglian Rising*.

required, serve another for the same wages as were the custom in the twentieth year of our reign."—Ordinance of Edward III. (1349).

"Laboreres that have no lande . to lyve on but her handes  
 Deyned nought to dyne a-day . nyght olde wortes.  
 May no peny-ale hem paye . ne no pece of bakoun,  
 But it be fresch flesch other fische . fryed other bake,  
 And that *chaude* or *plus chaude* . for chilling of her mawe.  
 And but if he be heighlich buyred . ellis wil he chyde . . .  
 And thanne curseth he the kyng . and al his conseil after,  
 Such lawes to loke . laboreres to greve."

WILLIAM LANGLAND, *Vision of Piers the Plowman*.

The previous section was devoted to a delineation of the main features of the manorial system. When and why did that system disappear? It has been the fashion among historians during the last half-century to attribute its dissolution to a catastrophic disturbance in the conditions of agriculture and labour in the latter half of the fourteenth century. That disturbance has been in turn ascribed to the visitation of the Bubonic Plague in 1348-9, and to the Peasant Revolt, commonly known as Wat the Tyler's Rebellion, in 1381.

The author of this interesting and ingenious explanation was Mr. Frederick Seebohm, who, in 1865, contributed to the *Fortnightly Review* two noteworthy and arresting articles on the "Black Death." Mr. Seebohm's conclusions were, from the first, fiercely assailed in many expert quarters, and they are not now accepted in their entirety by any competent critic. But the picture which he drew of the havoc wrought by the "Black Death" was extraordinarily vivid, and it is not too much to say that his articles, despite much destructive criticism, have left a permanent impress upon the literature of the subject. It is, therefore, worth while to recall the substance of his argument.

In the first place, he claimed to have proved by a variety of tests that the population of England prior to the Black Death was considerably greater

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than had been commonly supposed. He computed it at about 5,000,000—a figure which is now accepted by the most recent and most competent critics. The Poll Tax of 1377 affords fairly conclusive evidence that in that year the population did not exceed 2,500,000, and it is certain that it did not again attain to the previous figure of 5,000,000 until the seventeenth century was well advanced. If Mr. Seeböhm's computation is correct, the mortality caused by the plague must have been stupendous, amounting to not less than a half of the total population. This is the basis of his argumentative superstructure. Depopulation, particularly severe in the ranks of the villeins, was mainly responsible for the dissolution of the manorial economy; for the abandonment of the customary system of tillage; the beginning of "enclosures"; the laying down of the arable fields to permanent pasture; the development of sheep-breeding; the export of wool, on a large scale, to the Low Countries; above all, for the premature emancipation of the great mass of the English peasantry, and the divorce of the cultivator from the ownership of the soil.

If Mr. Seeböhm's contentions be accepted, it is clear that the Black Death ought to be regarded as the central event in the social and economic history of England. How far is it possible to accept them?

The manorial records prove, beyond all possibility of doubt, that the mortality caused by the visitation of the plague in 1348-9 was particularly heavy among the villeins, and this evidence is confirmed by the testimony of contemporaries. "So great was the want of labourers and workmen of every art and mystery, that a third part and more of the land throughout the entire kingdom remained uncultivated; labourers and skilled workmen became so rebellious that neither the

king nor the law nor the justices, the guardians of the law, were able to punish them."<sup>1</sup> The results of the depopulation were quickly reflected in a fall in the value of land. Land which (according to Seebohm) was worth 11½*d.* an acre in 1336 fell to 9½*d.* in 1381 and to 6*d.* in 1417.

Prices also fell rapidly. "In that time," writes a contemporary, "there was sold a quarter of wheat for 12*d.*, a quarter of barley for 9*d.*, a quarter of beans for 8*d.*, a quarter of oats for 6*d.*, a large ox for 40*d.*, a good horse for 6*s.*, a good cow for 2*s.*, and even for 18*d.* And even at this price buyers were only rarely to be found. And this pestilence lasted for two years and more before England was freed from it."

Labour, naturally, was in great demand. "When," continues the same writer, "by God's mercy, it [the plague] ceased, there was such a scarcity of labourers that none could be had for agricultural purposes. On account of this scarcity, women, and even small children, were to be seen with the plough and leading the waggons." The shortage of labour necessarily led to a rapid increase in the scale of its remuneration. Individual lords, it would seem, were almost as anxious to pay the current rates as labourers were to demand them. But mediæval ideas were entirely opposed to leaving such matters to be determined by the free play of supply and demand, and while the plague was still raging the king, with the advice of certain nobles and prelates, issued an Ordinance<sup>2</sup> (1349) which formed the basis of all the subsequent Statutes of Labourers. All able-bodied persons, under the age of sixty, were to be compelled, if required, to work on penalty of imprison-

<sup>1</sup> *Registrum Roffense* in Cotton MS., quoted by Vickers *England in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> See extract at the head of this section.

ment. No employer was, on pain of treble fine, to pay higher wages, and no labourer was, on pain of imprisonment, to accept higher wages than those which were customary before the plague. "Carters, ploughmen, drivers of the plough, shepherds, swineherds, and all other servants shall take liveries and wages, accustomed in the twentieth year of the present King's reign, or four years before, so that in the country where wheat was wont to be given, they shall take for the bushel ten pence, or wheat at the will of the giver, till it be otherwise ordained . . . and none shall pay in the time of hay-making but a penny the day; and a mower of meadows for the acre five pence, or by the day five pence; and reapers of corn in the first week of August two pence, and in the second three pence, and so till the end of August. . . . None shall take for the threshing of a quarter of wheat or rye over two pence, and the quarter of barley, beans, peas and oats over one penny if so much were wont to be given. . . . Carpenters, masons, and tilers, and other workmen of houses, shall not take by the day for their work, but in manner as they were wont, that is to say: A master carpenter three pence and another two pence; a master mason four pence and other masons three pence; and their servants one penny. Tilers three pence and their knaves one penny, and other coverers of fern and straw three pence and their knaves one penny."<sup>1</sup>

But if wages were fixed by authority, so were prices. There was to be no attempt to take advantage of scarcity on either side. All victuals and necessities of life were to be sold at reasonable prices. The Ordinance was embodied in a Statute in 1350, and the Statute was re-enacted, with penalties of increased severity for dis-

<sup>1</sup> Statutes i. 311 (1350-51).



obedience, in 1361, and nine times more at frequent intervals before the middle of the fifteenth century.

The Statutes of Labourers do not, perhaps, deserve all the strictures passed upon them by those who seek and find in them evidence of selfish class legislation. But though less malicious than has been commonly supposed, they were not less impotent. "The labourers," so we read in Knighton's *Chronicle*, "were so lifted up and obstinate that they would not listen to the king's command, but if any one wished to have them he had to give them what they wanted, and either lose his fruit and crops, or satisfy the lofty and covetous wishes of the population . . . and afterwards the king had many labourers arrested and sent them to prison; many withdrew themselves and went into the forests and woods; and those who were taken were heavily fined." In other words, in face of an economic crisis so overwhelming in its intensity, the Legislature found itself impotent. It made strenuous efforts to enforce its authority. Special justices were appointed to secure obedience to the law, and penalties of increasing and indeed excessive severity were imposed. Thus in 1361 it was ordained that any labourer who strayed from his own domicile in search of higher wages should be branded on his forehead with the letter F. But all to no purpose; for nine years later Parliament complains that the errant labourers "are so warmly received in strange places suddenly into service, that this reception gives example and comfort to all servants, as soon as they are displeased with anything, to run from master to master into strange places." Human nature and economic law combined were, as usual, much too strong for mere statute law.

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Let us attempt to visualise the contemporary situation.

Land was, for the moment, a drug in the market; labour, on the contrary, was in a position of unprecedented economic advantage. Small wonder that under these circumstances the peasants should have preferred their labour to their land, and should have sacrificed the possession of the latter in order to secure a free market for the former.

For the villein was bound to work for his lord so long as he adhered to his own manor. It is true, as will be seen later, that on many manors a certain portion, if not the whole, of the services of the villein-cultivators had been commuted for payments in money or kind. But on many manors no commutation had taken place, and even where it had, there would be strong temptation on the part of the lords to insist on a reversion to the *status quo ante*. How far the lords yielded to this temptation is still matter of controversy.<sup>1</sup> For the villeins, on the contrary, there was every inducement to flee from the manors to which they were legally attached and take service under alien lords at a rate of remuneration determined, not by the Legislature, but by economic conditions.

No migration, however, could satisfy the demand for labour, and the lords found themselves face to face with an agrarian crisis of unprecedented severity. They made desperate efforts to counteract the economic tendencies, to compel the villeins to remain upon or return to the soil to which they were *ascripti*. Such efforts

<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Johnson, *Disappearance of the Small Landowner*, p. 25. Mr. Johnson declares that Mr. Thorold Rogers's affirmative assertion "rests upon an assumption for which there is no proof," and many of the best modern authorities are with Mr. Johnson.

were only very partially successful, and by degrees the lords accepted the inevitable. They abandoned the vain effort to recapture errant villeins, they adopted new agricultural methods, and made experiments in unaccustomed forms of tenure. One such form of experiment is of peculiar interest because it was of relatively short duration and testified to the special and transitory conditions of the period. I refer to "stock and land lease," or what was later known as the *metayer* system. This expedient was probably borrowed from monastic usage, and is thus described by Mr. Rogers: "In the stock and land lease, the owner of the soil . . . let a farm furnished with seed, corn, and stock, live and dead, to a tenant for a time, the condition being that at the end of the term the tenant should deliver the stock scheduled to him, in good condition, or pay the money at which they were valued when the lease commenced. . . . The stock and land lease generally prevailed for about seventy years after the owner had put it into operation on his own estate. Thus, Merton College let most of its land on this principle, shortly after the Great Plague, and continued it to about the end of the first quarter in the fifteenth century. . . . But the monasteries had it in operation until the close of the century."<sup>1</sup> Another expedient adopted on some manors was to let off the demesne in separate farms at money rents. "Sometimes the entire manor was leased to one or more tenants, who paid a fixed annual rent for the whole, and these sublet portions of the land."<sup>2</sup> Such expedients were, however, presumably exceptional. What most commonly happened was that the lords took advantage of

<sup>1</sup> *Economic Interpretation of English History*, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Prothero (*op. cit.*, p. 43), who cites in illustration the case of the Manor of Hansted in Suffolk.

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the death or desertion of the villein occupiers to enclose and consolidate their holdings in the common arable fields. Where soil and climate permitted, they laid the arable land down to grass ; grazed it off with sheep, and developed a lucrative trade in wool. The cities of the Low Countries, then the great centres of the woollen industry, were ready to absorb any quantity of English wool. Farming, therefore, came to be regarded not only as a means of sustenance, but as a source of profit. Commercial ideas were applied to land-holding, and men made room for sheep. Nevertheless, it must be observed that, in one substantial sense, victory rested with the villeins. They made good their claim to do what they would with their own labour. In a word, they gained their freedom. But in gaining their freedom they lost their land. This generalisation must not, however, be pushed too far. Some of the villeins—how large a proportion it is impossible to say—undoubtedly remained upon their native manors, got their services commuted for a quit-rent, and so passed into a position of security and independence by becoming *copyholders*. Nevertheless, it is not too much to say that before the end of the fourteenth century a great many villeins, if not, as some assert, the great mass of the English peasantry, had ceased to be interested, as quasi-proprietors, in the soil they tilled. The first of a series of violent shocks had been administered to the old rural economy. Some of the villeins had risen to the position of copyholders, a few had become tenant farmers, but the great mass of them had been permanently divorced from all ownership of land and had sunk to the level of landless labourers.

Far different were the fortunes of the continental serfs. Not for four hundred years later

did they secure emancipation. But the postponement of personal freedom gave them one signal advantage. Emancipation was accomplished without the sacrifice of their rights in the soil.<sup>1</sup> In France, indeed, the peasants had become virtually owners of the soil, subject only to a quit-rent reserved to the lord, long before the Revolution brought them complete personal liberty. Nor did the attainment of the latter rights involve, as was frequently the case in England, the loss of the former. In Prussia the agrarian legislation of Stein and Hardenburg enabled the serfs to attain the same end by a different method.<sup>2</sup> In both countries the result has been that a very large proportion of the land is still cultivated not by tenants, but by owners.

Into the merits or demerits of a system of peasant-ownership it is no part of my immediate purpose to enter. I am concerned only with an exposition of the facts, and the pertinent fact is that in England, and in England alone among the Western nations, the peasantry—or many of them—lost their proprietary rights in the land about the same time that they acquired personal freedom. That the one was the *result* of the other I am not disposed, in the light of recent criticism, to affirm. Changes of this kind are more gradual than the exigencies of historical drama demand. Long before the visitation of the Black Death there had been forces in operation which were threatening the manorial system.

<sup>1</sup> The statement in the text is necessarily a broad one, but it is sufficiently accurate for my immediate purpose. The precise time and mode of emancipation varied much in different countries.

<sup>2</sup> The text of the Edict of Emancipation (October 9, 1807) is printed in Sir Robert Morier's article in *System of Land Tenure in Different Countries* (Cobden Club Essays), pp. 369 *seq.* Cf. also Seeley, *Life and Times of Stein*.

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Of these perhaps the two most powerful were, on the one hand, the desire of the lords for money payments; and, on the other, the anxiety of the villeins to get rid of the more burdensome of the services—more particularly the “boon” work at busy seasons—which they owed to their lords. The introduction of *scutage*—a composition for the military services of the sub-tenants—in 1156 necessitated money payments from the lords to the king; this in turn naturally reacted upon the demands of the lords upon their villeins. Moreover, villein labour, like all forced labour, was grudging and ineffective, and on economic grounds the lords were disposed to encourage commutation. The villein, on his part, was only too thankful to get quit of his labour dues in exchange for payment in money or kind. Thus, from the twelfth century onwards, serious inroads began to be made upon the symmetrical coherence of the old manorial economy. Villeinage was, in fact, gradually developing into a system of copyhold; more and more the villeins were getting their services defined and inscribed upon the “copy” or roll of the manor. Meanwhile, the place of the villein in the cultivation of the demesne was taken by a new agricultural class, a class of hired labourers, “recruited from the landless sons of tenants, or from cottagers who either had no holding at all or not enough to supply them with the necessities of life.” But neither in this nor in any other matter was there uniformity of practice. “Thus,” as Mr. Prothero points out, “there were hired farm servants and day-labourers cultivating the demesne land for money wages; tenants paying money rents only for their holdings; others who still paid their whole rent in produce or in labour; others whose labour services had been partially

commuted for money payments, either for a period or permanently."

Such was the condition of English agriculture and land tenure when the Black Death descended upon the country and swept away half the population. That Seebohm exaggerated the effects of that sudden visitation has been stoutly maintained and may be true. Undoubtedly he painted his picture with too big a brush. He certainly ignored important exceptions and limitations. Some of the phenomena attributed by him to a sudden and catastrophic disturbance were in reality observable at least a century earlier, some of them are not apparent until much later. The *Constitutions of Clarendon*, for example, afford evidence that villeins were already leaving the land in the twelfth century. Among those who remained upon it there was already, as we have seen, a marked tendency to commute their services—or some of them—for a quit-rent. The *Statute of Merton* (1236) exists to prove that the lords were already beginning to realise the importance of sheep-farming, and were enclosing portions of the common pasture and the untilled waste, though the rights of commoners were respected and safeguarded. The enclosure, or at any rate the consolidation of the lord's portion of the arable—the *demesne*—had begun still earlier. The lords, according to Mr. Prothero, "had also begun to encourage partners in village farms to agree among themselves, to extinguish their mutual rights of common over the cultivated land which they occupied, to consolidate their holdings by exchange, and to till them as separate farms."<sup>1</sup> The tenant farmer had begun, here and there, to make his appearance in the village community, and of wage-paid,

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 38.

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independent labourers there were not a few. All these things compel us constantly to bear in mind Maitland's warning that economic history is not catastrophic.<sup>1</sup> It is obviously true that in this department of national development, even more perhaps than in others, changes are gradual, and only perceptible if registered at considerable intervals. Yet, it is none the less true that certain stages in the process of evolution stand out as peculiarly critical and significant, and it would land us in lamentable error, if, in the cautious and laudable desire to avoid exaggeration, we were to minimise their startling and dramatic results. One such epoch in the history of the English land system is unquestionably furnished by the century which followed the visitation of the Bubonic Plague in 1348-9, and we owe to Seeböhm a debt, which it is now fashionable to underestimate, for calling special attention to its real significance.

Whatever the ultimate results of the depopulation may have been, there can be no question as to its effect upon the immediate situation. The social economy was completely disorganised; the labour market was dislocated, and the gradual processes of economic evolution were, if not permanently arrested, at least temporarily diverted.

One, at any rate, of those processes was in the long run emphasised and accelerated. Commutation of labour services for rent in money or kind was far more rapid after the Black Death than before. Taking eighty-one specified manors, before the Plague, it has been found that on six all labour services had been commuted; on

<sup>1</sup> And the not less impressive warning of Mr. L. L. Price that people are too prone to think that changes are not merely catastrophic, but universally simultaneous and uniform in their occurrences, whereas in one place we find survivals and in another anticipations.



thirty-one there had been partial commutation; on forty-four none. Taking 126 manors in the decade 1371-80, complete commutation had taken place on forty; partial on sixty-four, and only on twenty-two had there been none. On 182 manors somewhat later (1440) there was complete commutation on 101, partial on 71, while only on 8 was there no commutation except for team work.<sup>1</sup> It is clear, therefore, that by the middle of the fifteenth century the old manorial economy was rapidly breaking up. There were traces of villeinage to be found even in the later years of the sixteenth century, but so cautious a scholar as the Rev. A. H. Johnson is able to affirm that for all practical purposes villeinage by tenure and villeinage by blood had disappeared before the end of the fifteenth century. Its disappearance cannot, of course, be ascribed wholly to a single cause. The Peasant Revolt of 1381, though generally described as a failure, contributed something to the general result. The development of the export trade in wool and the beginnings of a rough woollen manufacture provided an even more powerful solvent. But despite the anxiety of the modern scholar to minimise the importance of catastrophic changes, I cannot doubt that among the operative factors place must still be found for the great pestilence of 1349.

Discussion of causes may, however, be allowed to rest. I am concerned rather to estimate broad results. As to these there can be no dispute. The manorial organisation which for four centuries at least had dominated the rural life of England, was broken into fragments before the

<sup>1</sup> The figures are from Mr. T. W. Page's *Villeinage in England*, and are cited partly by Prothero, *op. cit.* p. 40, partly by Johnson, *op. cit.* p. 32.

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middle of the fifteenth century. Traces of it survived, in an agricultural sense, down to the last decades of the eighteenth century, but as a coherent system—as the judicial and social unit—it disappeared four hundred years earlier. In place of the feudal hierarchy of lord, freeholder, and villein, there had definitely and clearly emerged the new classes of landlord, capitalist-farmer, and landless wage-paid labourer.<sup>1</sup> Relations are determined no longer exclusively by status, but by contract. Wages and rents are alike becoming obnoxious to the influence of competition. There is no rigid uniformity in the new system, any more than there was in the old. There are numberless exceptions, anomalies, and survivals recalling social and economic conditions which in their integrity have passed away. Nevertheless, profound changes have taken place and must be registered—changes which have left a deep and permanent impress upon the English land system and upon the social and economic life of the English people. Among these I have desired to lay particular emphasis upon two.

The first is the fact that the mass of the English peasantry attained personal liberty at least four hundred years sooner than the corresponding class in continental countries. The second is the no less striking fact that whereas in France and Prussia and elsewhere great numbers of the actual cultivators of the soil have, throughout the ages, remained attached to it by ties of ownership, in England proprietary rights are confined to a relatively small class, while the actual work of agriculture is done by tenant farmers and landless labourers who have no permanent connection with the land they cultivate.

<sup>1</sup> The *copyholder* to whom allusion has been frequently made above may be regarded as the link between the older system and the new.

One other point has, I submit, emerged: the English peasant of the fourteenth century was not driven from the land to make room for sheep. His removal—so far, indeed, as he was removed—was due partly to “the act of God,” and partly to his own very natural and intelligible anxiety to take advantage of a sudden and unprecedented economic opportunity. The turn of the landlord came later, and may furnish an appropriate text for another chapter.

## CHAPTER' III

### THE AGRARIAN REVOLUTION OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

#### THE ENCLOSURE MOVEMENT

"And there where hath been many houses and churches to the Honor of God, now you shall find nothing but sheepcots and stables, to the ruin of man."—STARKEY'S *Dialogue*.

"Envy waxeth wonders strong  
The rich doth the poore wrong,  
God of His mercy suffereth long  
The devil his workes to worke,  
The towns go down, the land decayes  
Off cornefyldes, playne layes (grass lands)  
Gret men makithe now-a-dayes,  
A shepecott in the Church."—Contemporary Poem.

"O what a lamentable thing it is to consider that there are not at this day ten plows whereas were wont to be forty or fifty. Whereas your Majesties progenitors had an hundred men to serve them in time of peace and in time of wars, with their strength, policy, goods and bodies, your Majesty have now scant half so many."—BISHOP SCORY to Edward VI.

"Where there were once a great many householders and inhabitants there is now but a shepherd and his dog."—BISHOP LATIMER.

"Noblemen, and gentlemen, yea and certeyn Abbottes . . . leave no groundes for tillage, thei inclose al into pastures: thei throw doune houses: thei plucke downe townes, and leave nothing standyng, but only the church to be made a shepewse."

SIR THOMAS MORE, *Utopia*, p. 41.

THE first of the three critical epochs in the history of the evolution of the English land system was described in the last chapter. The

<sup>1</sup> For further information on the subjects treated in this chapter, reference may be made to: I. S. Leadam, *Domesday of Inclosures*

second is that of the sixteenth century, and it is the purpose of the pages that follow to examine its features in detail and to measure its general significance.

The changes registered during the sixteenth century were so rapid and various that they may be said without inaccuracy to amount in the aggregate to a revolution. Of all these changes perhaps the most fundamental and far-reaching is represented by the fact that for the first time agriculture becomes a business—a commercial occupation. The manorial economy of the Middle Ages was, as we have seen, self-contained and self-sufficing; the intercourse of the members of the agricultural community with outsiders was casual and infrequent; the exchange of commodities was restricted; a few necessities had to be imported, and, conversely, a limited amount of agricultural produce—and later of leather and wool—was exported; but the scale of this external trade was relatively insignificant, and insufficient to negative the generalisations already enunciated.

With the oncoming of the sixteenth century all this is changed. But the changes in the agrarian

(1897). R. E. Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present* (1912). R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*. A. H. Johnson, *The Disappearance of the Small Landowner* (1909). W. J. Ashley, *Economic History*, vol. ii. J. E. T. Rogers, *History of Agriculture and Prices, and Six Centuries of Work and Wages*. Cunningham as before. E. C. K. Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure*. Miss E. M. Leonard, *Early History of English Poor Relief*. G. Unwin, *Industrial Organisation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. F. A. Gasquet, *Henry VIII. and the English Monasteries*. E. P. Cheney, *Social Changes in England in the Sixteenth Century*. A. F. Pollard, *The Protector Somerset*. J. A. Froude, *History of England*. Besides such accessible contemporary authorities as More, *Utopia*; Latimer, *Sermons*; *Discourse on the Commonweal of England* (ed. Miss Lamond). *Ballads from MSS.* (ed. F. J. Furnivall); and various publications of the *Early English Text Society*.

system are closely connected with a change, even more fundamental, in the whole position of England in the European economy. On the nature and significance of this, a preliminary word must, therefore, be said.

The great geographical discoveries in the last years of the fifteenth century brought these islands for the first time into the main stream of the world's commerce. Until then Britain was the *ultima Thule* of the commercial world; the mediæval trade-routes converged on the Mediterranean; the products of the East reached northern Europe by way of Venice and the Rhine valley, or Genoa and Marseilles and the Rhone valley. By the time it reached England the stream of commerce was attenuated and sluggish. In all the apparatus, therefore, of commerce and finance, England was far behind the cities of Italy or the Rhineland; far behind those of Southern France, or even of the Low Countries. But the blocking of the old trade-routes by the conquering advent of the Ottoman Turk; the discovery of the Cape route to the East by the mariners of Portugal; the discovery of the great Western Continent by Italian mariners sailing from Spain and England respectively, caused a momentous shifting in the centre of economic, and, indeed, of political, gravity, and, in the long run, brought England into the forefront of the nations of the world.

Domestic legislation quickly responded to the altered condition of external affairs. From the time of Henry VII. onwards we perceive an altogether novel solicitude in regard to the interests of trade. The first of the Tudors was not slow to apprehend the importance of adapting policy to the new situation. "He ever strove," wrote Bacon, "that merchandize

being of all crafts the chief craft, and to all men most profitable and necessary, might be the more plentifully used, haunted, and employed in his realms and dominions." The statute-book bears witness to the changed attitude of the Government. Legislation is obviously dictated by the principles afterwards identified with "mercantilism."<sup>1</sup> Protection is afforded to infant industries at home: partly by checking the export of raw materials, partly by restraining the import of manufactures; the export of manufactures is, on the other hand, encouraged; navigation is regulated in the interests of native shippers and native manufacturers; Gascon wines are to be imported only in British ships; commercial treaties are concluded with foreign countries; the currency is improved; a standard is maintained in measures and weights. Nor are the interests of "labour" forgotten. Idleness, indeed, is treated as a crime; but to those willing to work every encouragement is given, and the State does its utmost to maintain a reasonable rate of wages, and to limit the hours of work.

All these things point to the coming of a new economic era. But how, it may be asked, did the change react upon the agrarian system? How, if at all, did it affect the land problem? The agrarian revolution of the sixteenth century can, I submit, only be understood and interpreted in the light of the facts which I have roughly summarised above. The widening of commercial markets, due mainly but not exclusively to the geographical discoveries, led, in time, to the division of labour and to the specialisation of industry. Among the industries thus specialised agriculture was incomparably the most important.

<sup>1</sup> Anticipations of the new mercantilist policy may be discovered in legislative enactments as early as Richard II.

But if agriculture was to take its place in a system of specialised industries, its methods must be modified, if not revolutionised. Production for the sustenance of a series of self-sufficing communities is one thing; production for a nation which is passing into the commercial stage is something which may be worse or better, but is, at any rate, vastly different.

Agriculture, then, was to be commercialised. How did this affect the agricultural community economically, legally, and socially—as regards production, land tenure, and the relations of class with class? The process of agricultural change is usually described as involving the substitution of pasturage for tillage, of sheep for men; and the method indicated is that of *enclosure*.

But the latter term is not free from ambiguity. In its primitive signification it means nothing more than the construction of hedges or walls or ditches to “enclose” land which had hitherto been open. In economic literature, however, it has come to be applied to three separate processes which, though roughly convergent in effect, ought to be clearly distinguished.

To distinguish them it is important to bear in mind the several parts of the manorial organisation: the lord's demesne; the arable holdings of the “tenants”; the meadowland; the commonable pasture; the waste and wood. Nor is it less important to distinguish the several classes which constituted the community: the lord; the freeholders; the customary tenants; and the cottars. Tenant farmers and hired labourers have to be added to these categories after the Black Death, but they are not of the essence of the manorial organisation. They presage, indeed, its impending dissolution.

Enclosure operated in various ways, according



as it was applied to these different parts of the manor and was effected by these different classes. If enclosure had meant nothing more than enclosing the lord's demesne it need not have caused any violent dislocation of the manorial economy—provided that the demesne had been consolidated, and did not remain intermixed with the strip-holdings of the tenants in the common arable fields. Assuming, however, that the demesne, as was very often the case, was compact, how did its enclosure affect the life and interests of the manorial community as a whole?

Before answering this question it is important to observe that the "enclosing," even of the demesne, was frequently done, not by the lord himself, but by the capitalist farmer, to whom it was let. These large tenant farmers, bringing enterprise and capital to a new specialised industry, supply the most striking and characteristic of the new features of the new agricultural economy. They were generally graziers. Holding not by customary tenure but simply by rack-rent, they were compelled to put the land to the best economic use. The diminution of population after the Black Death, the scarcity of labour, the growth of the export trade in wool, the remarkable development of a home manufacture of cloth—all these circumstances combined to indicate sheep-breeding as the most profitable form of farming. Thus, enclosing came generally to mean the conversion of arable land to pasture, the breeding of sheep instead of the growing of corn. But not invariably. A certain amount of enclosure was unquestionably effected in order to improve the conditions of arable farming. Mr. Leadam, indeed, to whose opinion great weight must be attached, held that the amount of land enclosed for arable farming was consider-

able. But contemporary opinion, as reflected in the popular literature of the day, is against him, as is that of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Gay.<sup>1</sup> And this is surely a point on which contemporaries have the best right to be heard. They may, as Mr. Tawney points out, be mistaken as to the extent of the process, but hardly as to its general tendency. And contemporaries speak with no uncertain voice: it is against the sheep that their diatribes are directed. "Those shepe," wrote W. S., "is the cause of all those mischiefs, for they have driven husbandrie out of the country, by the which was increased all kind of foode. But now only shepe, shepe, shepe." "In the said Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Northamptonshire . . . where tillage was wont to be, now is stored great umberment of shepe."<sup>2</sup> "Where both corne of all sortes and also cattle of all kind were reared aforetime now is there nothing but only shepe."<sup>3</sup> Prose is unequal to the expression of adequate indignation:

"Commons to close and kepe  
Pore folk for bread to cry and wepe,  
Townes pulled down to pasture shepe,  
This ys the new gyse."

Sir Thomas More's vigorous denunciation of enclosers, trite as it has become, is too apposite to be omitted. "That one couetous and vnsatiable cormaraunte and uery plage of his natyue contrey maye compasse aboute and inclose many thousand akers of grounde to gether within one pale or hedge the husbandmen be thrust owte

<sup>1</sup> See on the whole controversy: I. S. Leadam, *Domesday of Enclosures*; Gay, *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc. (New Series)*, vol. xiv.; Johnson, *Disappearance of the Small Landowner*, p. 40; Tawney, *Agrarian Problem of Sixteenth Century*, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> *Certain Causes gathered in Four Supplications.*

<sup>3</sup> *Discourse of the Commonweal of England* (ed. Lamond), p. 48.

of their owne, or els either by coneyne and fraude, or by violent oppression they be put besydes it, or by wronges and iniuries thei be so weried, that they be compelled to sell all: by one meanes therfore or by other, either by hooke or crooke they muste needes departe awaye, poore, selye, wretched soules, men, women, husbands, wiues, fatherlesse children, widowes, wofull mothers, with their yonge babes, and their whole houshold smal in substance, and muche in numbre, as husbandrye requireth manye handes. Awaye thei trudge, I say, out of their knowen and accustomed houses, fyndyng no place to reeste in.”<sup>1</sup>

Equally well known and much more precise is Bishop Latimer's lament: “My father was a yeoman and had no lands of his own, only he had a farm of three or four pound a year at the uttermost, and hereupon he tilled so much as kept half a dozen men. He had walk for a hundred sheep and my mother milked thirty kine. He was able and did find the king a harness, with himself and his horse, while he came to the place that he should receive the king's wages. . . . He kept me to school. . . . He married my sisters with five pound or twenty nobles apiece. . . . He kept hospitality for his poor neighbours, and some alms he gave to the poor. And all this he did off the said farm, where he that now hath it payeth sixteen pounds by year or more, and is not able to do anything for his prince, for himself nor for his children, or give a cup of drink to the poor.”<sup>2</sup>

Latimer may have been guilty of the rhetorical exaggeration sometimes deemed permissible in the pulpit or on the platform. More was tracing the lines of an ideal commonwealth, and may for purposes of contrast have darkened the shadows

<sup>1</sup> *Utopia*, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> First sermon before Edward VI.

in the actual society of his day. But the concurrence of contemporary opinion is overwhelming, and its significance is unmistakable. Whole villages were destroyed and their inhabitants were evicted from their homes and their lands to make room for sheep. As More picturesquely puts it: "Your shepe that were wont to be so meke and tame and so smal eaters, now be become so great devowerers and so wylde that they ate up, and swallow downe the very men themselves. They consume, destroye, and devoure whole fieldes, houses, and cities."

The broad fact, then, is beyond dispute. But in accepting it we must be critical as to its precise significance. In particular, we must be careful to discriminate between enclosure and enclosure. The conversion of the arable land of the demesne to pasture would necessarily decrease the demand for labour, and would, therefore, be resented as a grievance by two classes: by the landless labourers, increasingly numerous since the middle of the fourteenth century, and also by the cottars, who eked out the subsistence afforded by their few acres by working for hire. But, after all, the demesne was in an especial sense the property of the lord, and in enclosing it he was undeniably doing what he would with his own.

The lord, however, was not the only encloser; nor was the demesne the only portion of the manor which was laid down to grass. The class which was primarily affected by the enclosure movement was that of the customary tenants—the villeins of an earlier age. But before we consider their position a passing word may be said as to that of the freeholders. Except in the eastern counties they were a relatively unimportant section of the manorial economy, and their position was comparatively secure. Never-

theless, they also were affected by the enclosing movement, and complaints on their behalf are not rare. Besides the strips which they held in the common arable fields, the freeholders, like the lord and the customary tenants, had rights in the meadows, the common pasture, and the wood and waste. Any diminution in the extent of common pasture would, of course, react disadvantageously on their arable cultivation. To this extent they suffered, but their grievances were relatively slight. Mr. Tawney, indeed, in his elaborate study of the sixteenth century, shows that there is ground for the belief that the freeholder's position actually improved during this period owing to the fact that the rights of the lord were hardly worth enforcing against the freeholders. There was no means of evicting them except by purchase, and there is no evidence that, as a fact, they were evicted. "They had nothing to fear from the agrarian changes which disturbed the copyholder and the small tenant farmer, and a good deal to gain; for the rise in prices increased their incomes, while, unlike many copyholders and the tenant farmers, they could not be made to pay more for their lands. . . . Leaseholders and copyholders suffer because they can be rack-rented and evicted. The freeholders stand firm, because their legal position is unassailable."<sup>1</sup> The freeholders, it need hardly be added, formed the backbone of the class of "stout yeomen" whose existence moved the admiration of social observers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They failed, however, to survive the rapid changes at the close of the latter century, and the causes of their disappearance will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 33, 34. The tenant farmers, of course, in the form of rent; the copyholders by an increase in fines.

Meanwhile, it remains to consider the position of the customary tenants. These latter, despite the increase of leasehold tenancies, formed the great bulk of the agricultural population in the sixteenth century. According to one estimate<sup>1</sup> they amounted to 60 per cent of all landholders. It is, therefore, of supreme importance to understand how they were affected by the changes in progress.

At this point one word of caution must be interposed. It is misleading to assume that the customary tenants were altogether passive spectators of the revolution, or the unwilling victims of it. A great deal of enclosure was voluntarily effected by them. There is, indeed, evidence to prove that the policy of enclosure was actually initiated by them. But this was enclosure of an entirely different kind from that which excited the indignation of contemporaries. It was not the conversion of arable land to pasture, but the redistribution, the concentration and consolidation of the intermingled strips in the common open-fields. "It is plain," writes Mr. Tawney, "that there was a well-defined movement from the fourteenth century onwards which made for the gradual modification or dissolution of the open-field system of cultivation, and that it originated not on the side of the lord or the great farmer, but on the side of the peasants themselves, who tried to overcome the inconvenience of that system by a spontaneous process of re-allotment, sometimes, but not always, in conjunction with actual enclosure. On one manor it proceeded by the piece-meal encroachment of individuals, on another by the deliberate

<sup>1</sup> Tawney, p. 41, who adds: "On the Midland manors 62 per cent., in Wilts, Devonshire, and Somerset 77 per cent., in Northumberland 91 per cent., of all those holding land are customary tenants."

division of the common meadow or pasture, on a third by the voluntary exchanging by tenants of their strips so as to build up compact holdings, on a fourth by the redistribution of the arable land. . . . The open-field system of cultivation was, in fact, already in slow motion in several parts of England, when the impact of the large grazier struck it, enormously accelerated the speed of the movement, and diverted it on to lines which were new and disastrous to the bulk of the rural population."<sup>1</sup>

Against "enclosure" in the sense of consolidation, there was nothing whatever to be said. On the contrary, it increased the productivity of the land, and minimised social friction without diminishing or even redistributing population. All that it involved was the redistribution of holdings in such a way that they could be cultivated in severalty and according to the individual wishes of the holder instead of conformably with the common scheme.<sup>2</sup> The report of the first of a lengthy series of Royal Commissions—the Inquisition ordered by Wolsey in 1517—must refer in the main, though not exclusively, to enclosures of this character. That report contains a complete account of the enclosure movement since 1488, and the results already attained during the intervening twenty-nine years are remarkable.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 165-6.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Johnson (*op. cit.* p. 55) gives an instance of one manor in which a tenant owned 19 acres in 36 different strips, and where a common-field of 1,074 acres was divided among 23 owners with 1,238 separate parcels. Can we wonder that he then vehemently asks, "How in Heaven's name could that intensive cultivation which alone has enabled England to compete with other lands have been carried on under such a system"? For a modern illustration of similar inconveniences cf. account of the Isle of Axholme, ap. A. D. Hall, *Pilgrimage of British Farming*, pp. 104 seq. : "It is difficult to understand how a system of farming so wasteful of labour can possibly survive." *Contra* cf. Slater, *op. cit.* p. 52.

The rental value of enclosed arable as compared with open-field arable had already increased 31 per cent., while the value of enclosed pasture was greater and exceeded that of enclosed arable by 27 per cent. No wonder that William Harrison, in his *Historical Description of the Island of Britayne*, could affirm (1577): "The soil had growne to be more fruitful, and the countryman more painful, more careful, and more skilful for recompense of gain."<sup>1</sup> The same point is made by the greatest of modern authorities with unanswerable force: "When once land was regarded as an important asset in the wealth of the nation, national interests demanded that it should be utilised to the greatest possible advantage. Without enclosures the soil could not be used for the purposes to which it was best adapted, or its resources fully developed. . . . Under the open-field system one man's idleness might cripple the industry of twenty: only on enclosed farms separately occupied could men secure the full fruit of their enterprise." This fact had slowly revealed itself during the last two centuries. Few practical men would have disputed the truth of Fuller's statement: "The poor man who is monarch of but one enclosed acre will receive more profit from it than from his share of many acres in common with others."<sup>2</sup>

It was not the poor man only whose eyes were open to this truth. If it behoved the owner of one virgate (30 acres) to enclose, *a fortiori* it behoved the owner of many virgates. Initiated by the peasantry, who were the first to feel the practical inconvenience, if not to appreciate the economic wastefulness of the open-field system,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted ap. Prothero, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Prothero, p. 64. The advantages are not denied by Mr. Tawney, "provided that enclosure took place by consent" (cf. p. 169).



the policy was adopted by the lord of the manor, or more frequently by the tenant farmer to whom, in an increasing number of instances, the manor was let. Neither lord nor rack-rented tenant was, it may be feared, over-scrupulous as to the rights of customary tenants, while the nature of customary tenure made eviction comparatively easy. Many copyholders made a brave fight for their land. The Tudor Government, as we shall see, was on their side. The "Prerogative Courts"—notably the Court of Star Chamber and the Court of Requests—decidedly favoured their cause. But not many even of the more substantial copyholders could afford to fight a powerful lord or a rich grazier. Still less could the cottars. Where the peasants had anticipated the enclosure movement and had themselves voluntarily consolidated their holdings, their position was decidedly more favourable. On such manors there was at once less excuse and less opportunity for the operations of the big encloser.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary authorities attest the fact that whole towns (*i.e.* townships) were destroyed and thousands of peasants were evicted.

The extent of these evictions, and of the enclosures which were primarily responsible for them, has been and is the subject of acute controversy. The *Four Supplications* (1551) puts the evictions at the enormous total of 300,000, an estimate based upon the calculation that every plough, of which 50,000 are said to have "decayed," supported six persons.<sup>2</sup> But it is difficult to believe that one person in every ten of the population was disturbed, and most

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* in Kent, Essex, Cornwall, and parts of Devonshire. Cf. Tawney, pp. 153-4, who makes this interesting point.

<sup>2</sup> E. E. Text Society, p. 101.

authorities agree that the estimate contains gross exaggeration. Mr. Gay estimates that the total number of persons displaced between 1455 and 1637 amounts to about 34,000, and that figure is substantially accepted by Mr. Prothero and Mr. Johnson.<sup>1</sup> Estimates as to the acreage enclosed are equally divergent. Reference has been already made to contemporary opinions on this matter, and similar testimony might be multiplied to any extent. Such opinions, emanating for the most part from preachers, pamphleteers, and philanthropists, do not, as a rule, pretend to be based upon precise investigation, and from one point of view are clearly devoid of scientific value. Professor Gay, indeed, speaks of the contemporary literature as marked by "hysterical and rhetorical complaint" and as "condemned by its very exaggeration."

Contemporaries cannot, of course, be expected to see any economic movement in its true perspective; they cannot gauge ultimate results; they cannot reach scientific conclusions. They see the suffering, which is perhaps the inevitable incident, as 'it is unquestionably the usual accompaniment of periods of profound economic upheaval. Whether anything can be done by wise legislation and sympathetic administration to render inevitable changes less harsh in their operation, and to mitigate the sufferings of innocent victims, is a question to which I shall recur. Be that as it may, the changes of this particular period were so rapid and far-reaching as to justify the use of the term "revolution." How far did that revolution extend?

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Johnson, p. 58, Prothero, p. 66, but cf. Leadam (Trans. R. H. Soc., xiv.), who puts it higher. Mr. Tawney reckons (using the reports of the Commissioners) that from 1485 to 1517, 6,931 persons were displaced, and 2,232 between 1578 and 1607, p. 262.

The ground has been worked over with minute care by several modern investigators. To what conclusions do their investigations tend? The reader may be again reminded that the subject was investigated by a Royal Commission in 1517, and that the process was repeated in 1548, under the sympathetic rule of the Protector Somerset; by Queen Elizabeth in 1566; by James I. in 1607; and no less than four times during the "personal rule" of Charles I.: between the dissolution of his third Parliament (1629) and the meeting of the fourth in 1640.<sup>1</sup> All the figures thus obtained are partial, and must be used with caution. None of the Commissions surveyed the whole ground. The investigations carried on in 1517-19 cover twenty-four counties; the returns for 1548 and 1566 relate only to four counties already surveyed in 1517-19, while that of 1607 relates to six, only one of which—Huntingdon—had not been included in any of the earlier returns. The aggregate result revealed in these returns is that out of a total acreage of 18,947,958, only 171,051, or 0·90, had during the period 1455-1607 been enclosed. These returns are, however, as Mr. Johnson<sup>2</sup> points out, "manifestly incomplete." In order to give them some completeness, Mr. Gay has worked out an ingenious calculation,<sup>3</sup> as a result of which he estimates that the enclosures amounted to 516,673 acres, or 2·76 per cent. of the total area of England. But even this does not satisfy Mr. Johnson. "It would seem," writes the latter, "that Mr. Gay, with all his care, has underestimated the extent of the en-

<sup>1</sup> The dates of Charles's Commissions are 1632, 1635, and 1636. On the whole subject cf. Leadam, *Domesday of Enclosures*; Gay, *Trans. Hist. Soc.*, vols. xiv. and xviii., and *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, xvii.

closures in the twenty-five counties (enumerated in the surveys of 1517-19 and 1607), and that at the very least some 127,000 more acres were enclosed between 1607-37." His own conclusion is that the total enclosures amounted to 744,000. Even so, as he justly adds, "when we compare this with the enclosures of the eighteenth century, it must be confessed that the extent is comparatively small." But these precise calculations, interesting as they are, concern rather the specialist historian. The amount enclosed may have been small in relation to the total area of England, but it may nevertheless have represented a considerable proportion of the land which was at that time practically accessible and available for cultivation.<sup>1</sup> Be this as it may, by the people immediately concerned the enclosers were regarded as "greedy cormorants" who make "parks or pastures of whole parishes," as "caterpillars of the commonweal" who "join lordship to lordship, manor to manor, farm to farm, land to land, pasture to pasture," and gather many thousands of acres of ground "together within one pale or hedge."<sup>2</sup> Nor did the people stop short at strong language. From time to time the growing indignation found vent in actual insurrection, as in the rebellion led by Robert Kett in East Anglia in 1549. Not that the East Anglians were in any special degree sufferers from enclosure. Norfolk and Suffolk were, in fact, among the lowest in the scale of enclosures—partly, perhaps, owing to the predominance of freeholders, and partly to the fact that the commercial character of the district had induced a

<sup>1</sup> The point is made by Professor Pollard, *Political History of England*, vol. vi. p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> See Prothero, p. 62, who quotes these and many similar denunciations.

good deal of voluntary enclosure at a relatively early date among the customary tenants. The special grievances alleged by the peasants who rose under Kett were enclosure of the common waste and pasture, and the survival of villeinage.

Kett's rebellion was, of course, suppressed; but it is important to ascertain how the movement which gave rise to social unrest was regarded by the ruling powers. The Tudor monarchs may have been despotic in temper, but their despotism was pre-eminently of the paternal sort. They had not accepted the commercial ideals which commanded increasing adherence among the nobles and the merchants of the realm. None of the Tudors were indifferent to money, but if the statute book may be accepted as indicative of policy, their conception of the Commonwealth was not that of the abstract economist. They were, on the contrary, obviously concerned to maintain upon the soil a sturdy and contented peasantry. This concern may, as some have hinted, have been prompted by anxiety as to national defence—the security of the realm against external foes. But their agrarian policy was not inspired exclusively by this motive. There mingled with it, at any rate, a genuine solicitude for the social well-being of the mass of their people.

Parliament was never permitted by the Crown to neglect the agrarian problem. On the contrary, from the accession of Henry VII. down to the close of the reign of Queen Elizabeth we have constantly recurring legislation on this subject. The preambles of this extended series of statutes paint, in colours hardly less lurid than those employed by the preachers and pamphleteers, the social and economic grievances of

the day. The two first statutes date from 1488. One was passed "for the keeping up houses for husbandage." Its preamble declares that "in some towns two hundred persons were occupied and lived by their lawful labours, now be there occupied two or three herdsmen, and the residue fall in idleness, the husbandry which is one of the greatest commodities of this realm is greatly decayed, churches destroyed, the service of God withdrawn, the bodies then buried not prayed for, the patrons and curates wronged, the defence of the land against our enemies outward feebled and impaired." To avert these evils, owners of houses let to farm with twenty acres of land were to be bound to maintain such houses and buildings "as were convenient and necessary for maintaining and upholding of tillage and husbandry." A second Act was passed by the same Parliament specifically to restrain enclosures in the Isle of Wight, lest the depopulation of that island should weaken our national defence at one of its most vulnerable points. The policy initiated by Henry VII. was consistently followed by Henry VIII., by Edward VI., by Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth. Acts of Parliament were passed in 1514, 1515, 1534, 1536, 1551, 1555, 1563, 1593, 1598, and 1601. The burden of the song varied little. The proportion of arable land was to be scrupulously maintained; newly-laid pasture was to be restored; no single individual was to be allowed to keep more than a limited number of sheep or to engross more than a given amount of land. The preamble of the Act of 1534 is typical of many. It runs as follows:

"Forasmuch as divers persons, to whom God in his goodness hath disposed great plenty, now of late have daily studied and invented ways how they might accumulate into few hands, as well

great multitude of farms as great plenty of cattle, and in especial sheep, putting such land to pasture and not tillage; whereby they have not only pulled down churches and towns, and enhanced the rents and fines of land so that no poor man may meddle with it, but also have raised the prices which hath been accustomed, by reason whereof a marvellous number of the people of this realm be not able to provide for themselves, their wives, and children, but be so discouraged with misery and poverty that they fall daily to theft and robbery, or pitifully die for hunger and cold."

This was the Act to which Thomas Cromwell, writing to his royal master, referred in the following optimistic terms:

"It may also please your most royal Majesty to know how that yesterday there passed your Commons a bill that no person within this your realm shall hereafter keep and nourish above the number of 2,000 sheep, and also that the eighth part of every man's land, being a farmer, shall for ever hereafter be put in tillage yearly; which bill, if by the great wisdom, virtue, goodness and zeal that your highness beareth towards this your realm, might have good success and take good effect among your lords above, I do conjecture and suppose in my poor, simple and unworthy judgment, that your highness shall do the most noble, profitable and most beneficial thing that ever was done to the commonwealth of this your realm, and shall thereby increase such wealth in the same amongst the great number and multitude for your most loving and obedient subjects as never was seen in this realm since Brutus' time."

No opportunity was neglected by the Tudor Government for enforcing the policy indicated in

the above letter. Thus, in the Act of 1536 for the suppression of the lesser monasteries, the grantees of the monastic lands were to be bound, under pain of heavy penalties, "to keep, or cause to be kept, an honest continual house and household in the same site or precinct, and to occupy yearly as much of the same demesnes in ploughing and tillage of husbandry, that is to say, as much of the said demesnes which hath been commonly used to be kept in tillage by the governors, abbots, or priors of the same houses, monasteries, or priories, or by their farmer or farmers occupying the same within the time of twenty years next before this Act."

Mention of the Act of 1536 suggests an interesting question as to the relation between the ecclesiastical and the agrarian movements of the sixteenth century. It is the fashion in some quarters—far removed from Roman Catholicism—to assert that the Reformation was a conspiracy devised by the rich for the impoverishment of the poor. That similar suspicions were entertained by contemporaries it is impossible to deny. Many of the peasants who rose in rebellion in the reign of Edward VI. undoubtedly associated religious innovations with economic and social changes effected to their own detriment. But that any such motive inspired those who were responsible for the ecclesiastical changes cannot be proved and is contrary to probability. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was pre-eminently the work of the State. It has been shown that the State was genuinely anxious, on more than one ground, to arrest and circumscribe the economic tendencies of the day. But notwithstanding the motives and intentions of the Government, it is an unquestionable fact that the Reformation did accentuate and accelerate



the agrarian revolution. By the dissolution of the monasteries, lands worth £140,000 a year (in the currency of that day) were confiscated to the Crown. The new bishoprics established by Henry VIII. and other corporations absorbed land worth £21,000 a year. Lands worth £50,000 a year were let on lease by the Crown; the rest, of the yearly value of £69,000, were granted or sold to nobles, courtiers, officials, lawyers, and industrials, with a small amount to physicians, clerks, and yeomen.<sup>1</sup> There is reason to suppose that a not inconsiderable portion of the land thus granted was resold by the grantees, tending, as Mr. Fisher points out, to an extremely brisk speculation in land during the last decade of the reign of Henry VIII. But whether the monastic lands were retained by the original grantees or resold, in either case they passed into the hands of men whose prime motive for the acquisition was to obtain the highest possible commercial return for the money invested. Between them and their tenants there were no ties of sentiment, and there was, therefore, nothing to restrain them from putting the land to the best economic use. Men might have to be evicted to make room for sheep; but what if they were? With the monastic owners it had been otherwise. Their methods of management may not have tended to get the best out of the land; leniency on the part of the landlords may have encouraged inefficiency and slackness among the tenants; but as to their leniency there can be little doubt. Nor as to their popularity; at any rate in the north of England and in the south-west. For it is significant that both in the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536) and in the western insurrection of 1549 there was a

<sup>1</sup> This follows the computation of Dr. Alexander Savine, of Moscow, whose materials were utilised by Mr. Fisher, *Political History*, v. 497.

clamorous demand for the restoration of the abbeys. There is no reason to doubt that this demand was inspired partly by religious motives, but that the economic motive was also operative is certain.

One other question must, at this point, be obtruded. The sixteenth century, more particularly the latter half of it, was a period of distress among the poor.<sup>a</sup> It was then that the problem of pauperism first presented itself in an acute form. How far was the dissolution of the abbeys responsible for the emergence of this new problem?

To ascribe it wholly to a single cause would be perversely unhistorical. Many causes contributed to the prevailing labour unrest: the dislocation of industry caused by the introduction of new commercial methods; the depreciation in the purchasing power of silver due to the discovery of the new world and the exploitation of the South American mines; the rise of prices, consequent partly upon the depreciation of the precious metals and partly upon the debasement of the coinage. All these factors had their share in the accentuation of distress. But the operation of such causes, then as always, was relatively subtle if not imperceptible. They did not strike the imagination and impress contemporaries as did the suppression of the monastic houses. For centuries past the monasteries had afforded the most accessible means of "poor relief." It is, indeed, a moot point whether, as Fuller asserted, they did not create as much pauperism as they cured. Father Gasquet is careful to vindicate the monks against the charge of indiscriminate almsgiving, yet even he admits that "no wayfaring person could depart without a night's lodging, meat,

drink, and money, it not being demanded whence he or she came or whither he would go." The abbeyes, in fact, offered a good deal more than the ordinary facilities of the casual ward, without the deterrent concomitants of the latter institution. That their dissolution threw a good many vagrants on their own resources, and that in this way it intensified the gravity of the problem by which the State was confronted is indubitable. An extended series of statutes exists to prove that the State was baffled in its efforts to solve that problem. But it is probable that the loss of the customary means of relief was the least important among the several ways in which the dissolution of the abbeyes accentuated the evils of vagrancy and pauperism. The loss of shelter was, of course, acutely felt by those who were accustomed to rely upon the hospitality of the monasteries. Nevertheless, it was the indirect results of the dissolution, far more than the direct, which intensified the social and economic crisis of the sixteenth century. A vast amount of landed property had been vested in the monasteries. This property was suddenly thrown upon the market. The agrarian changes would have been sufficiently grave and rapid and extensive had there been no ecclesiastical reformation. But there can be no question that the coincidence of the latter did much to increase their magnitude and quicken their pace.

The Tudor Government made valiant, if misguided, efforts to counteract economic tendencies which seemed to threaten both the security of the country and the well-being of its poorer inhabitants. They attempted by legislation to minimise the results of enclosures; they enacted statutes, of ever-increasing severity, against "lusty vagabonds," "valiant beggars

and vagrants; by the famous *Statute of Apprentices* (1563) they endeavoured to fix a scale of prices, to secure to the labourer a minimum wage and regular employment, and to compensate for the decadence of the guilds by enforcing a uniform system of apprenticeships; they renovated the currency; they did everything in their power to stimulate private charity and encourage voluntary almsgiving; and finally, by the memorable legislation of 1601, they laid upon the shoulders of the State a vast and direct responsibility for all such citizens as could not, or would not, maintain themselves. Under the Elizabethan Poor Law, definite, elaborate, and compulsory machinery was set up. Poor relief was for the first time recognised as a department of State activity. In every parish overseers of the poor were to be appointed under the control of the Justices of the Peace. Funds were to be raised by a parochial rate and were to be applied for the benefit of three distinct categories: the "lusty and able of body" were to be "set on work"; the impotent poor were to be relieved and maintained; and the children were to be apprenticed to trades, the boys until the age of twenty-four, the girls to that of twenty-one or until marriage. By such means did the Tudors endeavour to preserve social order and to mitigate the undeserved sufferings of the victims of an economic revolution.

How far, it may be asked, did this legislation achieve its object? How far was the intervention of the State effective? It is clear that, despite much continued distress, things were on the mend under Elizabeth. Was this amendment due to the action of the Government, or to the operation of economic forces? In some degree, doubtless, to the former; much more, I submit, to

the latter. The ills caused by misgovernment good government can cure. For the debasement of the coinage, for example, the greed of Henry VIII. and Edward VI. was directly responsible. And debasement was one of the factors contributing to depreciation : but only one. Debasement could be stopped, and the purity of the coinage restored. This self-denying task Queen Elizabeth accomplished. But, as we have seen, depreciation was due in far greater measure to the fact that the mines of South America were flooding the Old World with silver. With the operation of that force no Governments could effectually cope, and, despite their efforts, prices steadily rose. So did rents. In both cases the rise was due to natural causes, and legislation could do little to mitigate the effects. Nature, however, was more efficacious in the application of remedies. The economic movement ran its course. Enclosure was overdone ; the price of wool declined ; the price of wheat rose. Tillage once more became profitable, and reaction set in. Meanwhile, displaced labour gradually found its own level. The development of cloth manufactures ; the extension of over-sea commerce ; the call of maritime adventure—all these things did something to absorb redundant agricultural labour. Not, of course, immediately. The remedies prescribed by nature may be efficacious, but they are slow. Nature is prodigal of human life and careless as to human suffering. The cries of the afflicted rose to heaven, and sensitive and pitiful souls called upon the Government to restrain the greed of the wealthy and to assuage the sufferings of the poor.

That Government did its utmost to provide remedies is certain. It is equally certain that the remedies so applied were only partially

successful. Would it have been well for the community had their success been more complete?

Much suffering, wholly unmerited, might have been averted. But at what cost? Assume that the paternal despotism of the Tudors had succeeded in checking enclosures, in restraining evictions, in preventing rural depopulation, in damming the flow of labour towards the towns—in short, in neutralising the play of economic forces. Had it been well? It is perhaps dangerous to attempt to deal summarily with such a question, and detailed consideration is not appropriate to our immediate purposes. The question obviously raises others of a more general character. It raises the whole question of the relation of ethics to politics, and of both to economics. Upon such an enlarged discussion it would be impossible to enter.

Some points, however, seem to emerge with tolerable clearness. It is clear that, in the agrarian movement of the sixteenth century, mere cupidity played a considerable part; that some of the hardships suffered by the poor were avoidable and ought to have been avoided; that some of the advantages might have been secured without the concomitant evils. But is it not equally clear that the process was in the main natural, healthy, and, in the largest sense, profitable and advantageous? That the wealth of the nation was augmented is not denied. Was it at the cost of individual welfare? Let us suppose that the agrarian revolution had never taken place; or that, having been initiated, victory had remained with the forces of reaction. Suppose that the open-field system had continued to supply the normal type of arable cultivation (as, indeed, in many parts of the country it did); that the customary

tenants had remained rooted to the soil ; that the cupidity of the "cormorants" had been defeated, and that the men had succeeded in evicting the sheep. Whence would have come the impulse to maritime activity ; to world-adventure ; to geographical discovery and colonisation ? whence would the sea-ports and the market-towns which rose to prominence, under the Tudors have derived their supply of labour ? Had the tide of economic progress been averted in the sixteenth century, England might still have occupied in the polity of nations a contented place among the Denmarks, perhaps ultimately among the Belgiums. But she would have answered, in literal truth, to the description of Tennyson :

"Some third-rate isle half lost among her seas !"

Her place, among the great nations of the world, has been purchased with a price. Part of the price paid was the agrarian revolution of the sixteenth century. Was it too high ?

## CHAPTER IV

### THE AGRARIAN REVOLUTION OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

#### § 1. THE TERRITORIAL OLIGARCHY

"If ever a privileged class existed it was the English aristocracy during the eighteenth century."—ÉMILE BOUTMY.

"In no other country has so large an amount of salutary labour been accomplished by the upper classes as in England."—W. E. H. LECKY.

THE two previous chapters were intended to disclose the characteristic phenomena of two critical epochs in the history of the English land system. Before passing to the third it may

<sup>1</sup> On the subject of this chapter, refer (in addition to works already cited) to: Defoe, *Tour through Great Britain*. Horner, *An Essay upon the Nature and Method of ascertaining the Specific Shares of Proprietors upon the Inclosure of Common Fields* (1761). Arthur Young, *Farmer's Letters* (1768), *Political Arithmetic* (1774), and *Tours in England*. Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (1776). F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor* (1797). W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides*. W. Marshall, *The Rural Economy of Norfolk* (1787), *Midland and Southern Counties*. Porter, *Progress of the Nation* (ed. F. W. Hirst, 1912). A. Toynbee, *Industrial Revolution*. P. Mantoux, *La Révolution Industrielle*. Brodrick, *English Land and English Landlords*. Mrs. Stirling, *Coke of Norfolk and his Friends*. Lady Verney, *Peasant Properties*. G. Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Inclosure of Common Fields*. E. C. K. Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure*. W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*. H. Levy, *Large and Small Holdings*. J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (1760-1832). W. E. H. Lecky, *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*. C. G. Robertson, *England under the Hanoverians*. J. A. R. Marriott, *England since Waterloo*. Cf. also Reports of Poor Law Commission (1834); of Select Com-



be convenient to summarise the argument and to indicate briefly the stage which has been reached.

The capital events of the fourteenth century—the Great Pestilence and the Peasant Revolt—are said to have administered a violent shock to the rural economy of England. The effects of those events may have been exaggerated or misunderstood. Nevertheless, the fact remains that at the beginning of the fourteenth century the old manorial organisation existed in its integrity, and that before the century closed it had undergone violent dislocation. At the beginning of the century the land of England was cultivated by a semi-servile class remunerated for its labour by a share in the common arable fields, in the common pasture, and the common waste; practically secure in tenure, but “tied to the soil”; at the close of it villeinage was—despite legal survival—to all intents and purposes extinct, alike as a tenurial and as a social system, and the agricultural economy—based upon villein labour—was virtually shattered. That all this might have happened without the intervention of a violent catastrophe is not denied; that many other causes, tending to disintegration, were in operation is certain; but it is nevertheless true that in the evolution of the English land system we must regard the fourteenth century as the first of the critical epochs.

The second is marked by the agrarian revolution of the sixteenth century. The outstanding feature of that epoch was the commercialising of agriculture. The mercantile spirit—in more than one sense of the term—was abroad. Men looked

mittees on Agriculture (1814, 1821-2, 1833, 1836, 1848); of Royal Commissions on Agriculture (1879, 1893-7). W. J. Ashley (ap. *Economic Journal*, No. 90, vol. xxiii.), *Comparative Economic History and the English Landlord*.

to production to supply not merely subsistence but profit. Of this spirit there were many and diverse manifestations. Not the least important was the agrarian revolution, the core of which was the process of enclosure, the substitution of grazing for tillage, of sheep-breeding for corn-growing. The new graziers might be owners or tenants, but in either case command of capital was indispensable, and it was this condition which tended to knock out the small man. Contemporary literature bears testimony to much suffering, and manifestations of discontent were not infrequent. Nor can any one deny that the grievances of the peasants in the sixteenth century were genuine, or that the protests of preachers and philanthropists were intelligible. But it is quite certain that the actual extent of enclosure was far less than contemporaries would lead us to suppose, and that the ill-effects were far more transitory. Still, the agrarian changes of that period left a permanent impress upon the English land system, and registered an important stage in its evolution.

Far more important, however, is the period which it is proposed to pass under review in the present chapter—that of the eighteenth century.

For our immediate purpose the "eighteenth century" must be interpreted rather liberally, for nature, as Mr. Balfour once remarked, "does not exhibit her uniformity by any pedantic adherence to the decimal system." Politically, the "century" extends from the Revolution of 1688 to that of 1832; in an economic sense, it begins rather later, but it must be prolonged, at least, until 1850. It was, in fact, during the century between 1750 and 1850 that the modern England, with whose features we are familiar, came into being. And if this be true of the economic

system as a whole, not least is it true of land tenure and agrarian organisation.

On the threshold of the enquiry it is necessary to utter one word of caution and protest. To treat the history of the land system in isolation is almost bound to lead, as in conspicuous cases it has led, to misconception and misrepresentation. The agrarian movement which eventuated in the establishment of our existing land system cannot be understood; the social and economic changes by which it was accompanied cannot be fairly interpreted, unless the fact be kept steadily in view that the agrarian movement furnished only one factor in a much larger problem.

We are not likely nowadays to be allowed to forget that the period which witnessed the consolidation of great landed estates was marked also by the political triumph of the aristocracy. The Revolution of 1688, so often regarded as the climax of a struggle between the Crown and the people, served, in fact, to inaugurate the rule of a territorial oligarchy. It is true that in the eighteenth century the centre of political gravity was to be found in the House of Commons; but the House of Commons itself was dominated, and in large measure nominated, by a group of great families whose members monopolised the principal offices in the executive government. Into these close preserves even a Pitt found it difficult to force an entrance, a Burke found it impossible. Nor was the triumph of the oligarchy confined to the central government. The administration of local affairs was dominated by the same class. The Tudors, in the development of their benevolent dictatorship, had been compelled, as we have seen, to impose many onerous and responsible duties upon their "men-of-all-work"—the Justices of the Peace. But

they always kept a tight hold upon their agents. To the opposition of these same country gentlemen the Stuarts succumbed, and by the Revolution of 1688 the victory of the aristocracy was complete. Their ascendancy lasted for nearly a century and a half, until it was overthrown by the enactment of the Reform Bill of 1832.

Of that ascendancy, and its effect upon the political, social, and economic life of this country, two strongly contrasted views have been taken and expressed. The epigrammatic judgments of M. Émile Boutmy and of Mr. Lecky, prefixed to this chapter, may be accepted as typical of the two points of view. By the former the eighteenth century is regarded as a warning against oligarchical privilege; by the latter as a brilliant exemplification of the patriotic services which an enlightened aristocracy can render to a State.

Into the general merits of the controversy it is not necessary to enter. It is, however, important to enquire how the concentration of political power reacted upon the evolution of the land system. Its first and most obvious result was to make the exercise of all governmental functions, central and local alike, dependent upon the possession of land. Thus, knights of the shire were required to possess landed property of the value of £600 a year, borough members were to possess £300 worth; the qualification for a Justice of the Peace was raised by successive stages from £20 a year in land to £100, except for the sons of Peers and the heirs to landed property; deputy-lieutenants had to possess £200 a year in land; colonels of militia regiments £1,000, and lieutenant-colonels £600, and so on. The county franchise had been confined, ever since the reign of Henry VI., to 40s. freeholders, but as a liberal interpretation

was given to the term "freehold," no one who had any substantial and tolerably permanent interest in land was excluded. On the foundation of land, however, the whole political and social fabric was erected. That this political monopoly had a powerful influence upon the agrarian movement of the eighteenth century cannot be doubted. But this factor, though an important one, was not the only factor in the problem. Economic forces were also in active operation, and to insist exclusively upon the political ascendancy of the great landed proprietors, though it may give unity and coherence to the picture, involves a neglect of perspective, not to say a distortion of facts. For the agrarian movement was coincident not only with the period of political oligarchy, but with that of the Industrial Revolution.

Down to 1750 England, it must be remembered, was a land which carried a small and scattered population. The whole population could have been comfortably contained in the Greater London of to-day.<sup>1</sup> Not more than 24 per cent. of this population were town-dwellers. Three-fourths of the people lived on and by the land—but *not wholly by it*. No description of the agrarian movement can be other than misleading which does not emphasise the fact that under the old industrial system there was no sharp division of labour, no clear differentiation of economic functions, no specialisation of employment. Every farmer was at once farmer and manu-

<sup>1</sup> Before 1801—the date of the first official census—estimates of population are little better than guesses, but the most probable guess puts the population of England and Wales at just over 6,000,000 in the year 1750. Before 1750 the largest decennial increase was 3 per cent.; by 1801 the population was 9,187,176. For detailed discussion of this question cf. an interesting paper by E. C. K. Gonner, *Journal of the Statistical Society* (Feb. 4, 1913).

facturer, generally spinning his own wool, and sometimes weaving his own cloth. The first serious blow to the small agriculturist, whether owner or occupier, was the development of the cotton trade and the relative decline in the woollen industry. The second blow was dealt by a remarkable series of mechanical inventions: the fly-shuttle invented by a Lancashire weaver, Hargreaves, in 1764; the waterframe by Arkwright, of Cromford, in 1769; Compton's mule; Dr. Cartwright's power-loom; and, finally, the invention of the steam-engine by James Watt, and its application to manufacturing industry about the year 1790. These inventions gradually transformed the whole textile industry, and ultimately led to the establishment of the factory system. A third blow, hardly less important, was the discovery of a new method of smelting iron, by the substitution of coal for wood. Thus industry was transferred from the woodlands of the South to the coalfields of the Midlands and the North; the textile workers were dragged out of the farms and cottages and the country-sides, and massed into the factories and the towns. The bye-industry of the farmer was destroyed. For the first time the agriculturist had to live on agriculture or perish. Nay, more; for the first time the agriculturist had to feed a rapidly increasing urban population who produced no food-supplies for themselves. Unless agriculture—and English agriculture—could feed them, they, too, must needs perish. To extemporise an import trade in foodstuffs would in any case, under the circumstances of that time, have been difficult. To do so during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars would have been impossible. For it must not be forgotten that the crisis of the agrarian and industrial revolutions was coin-

cident with the greatest military struggle in which this country has ever been engaged. To the partisan historian this coincidence simply affords further evidence of the malignant subtlety and skill with which the territorial aristocracy wove the web of their coherent conspiracy against the poor. But such argument proves too much.

From the Napoleonic wars to the evolution of the English land system may seem to be a far cry, but, in fact, it is impossible to understand how the existing land system has come into being without a comprehension of the political and industrial movements which were coincident with, and incessantly reacted upon, the agrarian revolution of the eighteenth century.

Some of the more characteristic features of that revolution will be described in the following section.

## § 2. SCIENCE AND AGRICULTURE

"A fine picture is a good thing, but I had rather it had been a fine *tup*."—ARTHUR YOUNG.

"It is impossible to consider the history of English agriculture in the last century without arriving at the conclusion that its peculiar excellence and type sprang from the fact that the ownership and control of land were chiefly in the hands of a wealthy and not of a needy class."—W. E. H. LECKY.

"Point de fourrage, point de bestiaux : sans bestiaux aucun engrais ; sans engrais nulle récolte."—Flemish adage quoted by Prothero.

The first characteristic of the period now under review, in point both of time and importance, was the improvement of agricultural methods, the application of science to the art of farming. These improvements were introduced by an enlightened minority whose efforts were for a long time stubbornly resisted by the conservative

majority. Among the reforming agriculturists special mention must be made of such men as Jethro Tull, "Turnip" Townshend, Robert Bakewell, Ellmann of Glynde, Arthur Young, and Coke of Norfolk.

Jethro Tull (1674-1741) was a Berkshire gentleman who is chiefly famous for the invention of the drill, and the introduction of horse-hoeing industry. The father of the "Tullian system," he paved the way for many of the more important innovations of the century. Contemporary with Tull was Charles, second Viscount Townshend (1674-1738), the brother-in-law of Sir Robert Walpole and Secretary of State under the first two Hanoverian kings. Friction with his brother-in-law drove him out of politics into agriculture, and in 1730 he settled down at Raynham in Norfolk. Walpole's jealousy was in this case of indubitable advantage to his country, for it is safe to say that the few years which Lord Townshend devoted to the improvement of his Norfolk property were infinitely more fruitful in results than the whole of his political career. It was he who first taught English farmers the advantages of a scientific rotation of crops. He introduced the four-course, or "Norfolk," system, regularly alternating roots and artificial grasses with two kinds of cereals, and never taking two corn crops in succession. His devotion to root-crops earned him, indeed, the sobriquet by which he is known to history.

Robert Bakewell (1725-94) was remarkable for improvements in stock-breeding. Hitherto, oxen had been prized for their power of draught, sheep for the quality of their fleece. To scientific breeding little, if any, attention had been paid; breeding, according to the proverbial aphorism, meant nothing but "a promiscuous union of



nobody's son with everybody's daughter." Bakewell was the first to perceive that the time had come when both sheep and oxen would be regarded primarily for their meat-producing qualities; he set himself, by careful selection, to produce the requisite type, and, as regards sheep, with such success that Mr. Prothero has described him as "the creator not only of the new Leicesters, but of the Southdowns and the Cheviots." Incidentally, Bakewell made a large fortune. In 1789 his rams were hired for the season at 6,000 guineas by a society formed to extend his breed of sheep, and in 1793 the foundation of the Smithfield Club gave permanence to the system which he initiated. Its success may be judged from the fact that in 1710 the average weight of the cattle and sheep sold in Smithfield Market was: beeves 370 lbs., calves 50 lbs., sheep 28 lbs., lambs 18 lbs.; in 1795 they weighed respectively 800 lbs., 148 lbs., 80 lbs., and 50 lbs.<sup>1</sup>

The services rendered to scientific agriculture by Arthur Young (1741-1820) were of a different kind, but to the average reader are probably even more familiar. A failure as a practical farmer, he became the first Secretary to the Board of Agriculture, established in 1793, and did an immense work in the collection and dissemination of agricultural information. He was, in fact, the literary prophet of the new movement, and by his keenness and precision of observation, by his lucidity in exposition, and, above all, by his power of exciting enthusiasm for the subject which he made his own, he served well not merely his own generation, but all that have come after.

The greatest name of all remains to be com-

<sup>1</sup> Prothero, *Pioneers and Progress of English Farming*, pp. 51-3.

memorated. It is that of Thomas William Coke "of Norfolk"; first Earl of Leicester; the Lord of Holkham; the friend and follower of Charles James Fox; the most bigoted of Whigs; the kindest of hosts; the most generous of landlords; and one of the greatest agriculturists this country has ever known.<sup>1</sup> To Holkham Mr. Coke welcomed all that was most distinguished in the society of his long-drawn day (1752-1842): Princes and Peers, American diplomatists, artists, men of letters, scientific agriculturists, philanthropists, reformers of every sort, and simple farmers: to all he extended the same splendid hospitality. Few men of distinction, indeed, visited England in the period 1776-1842 without making the pilgrimage to Holkham, and learning from its lord the secret of the transformation which he had wrought in its artistic and agricultural aspect. When Coke succeeded to the property in 1776 "the whole district round Holkham was little better than a rabbit warren, varied by long tracts of shingle and drifting sand on which vegetation other than weeds was impossible." "The thin sandy soil," writes Mr. Prothero, "produced but a scanty yield of rye. Naturally wanting in richness, it was still further impoverished by a barbarous system of cropping. No manure was purchased; a few Norfolk sheep with backs like rabbits, and here and there a few half-starved milch cows; the little muck that was produced was miserably poor."<sup>2</sup> Coke's young bride was warned that the only vegetation she would find at her new home was "one blade of

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Stirling's admirable biography, *Coke of Norfolk and his Friends*, has lately (1912) been reissued in cheaper form by Mr. John Lane, and may be warmly commended to all who would learn more of one of the most striking personalities of this period.

<sup>2</sup> *English Farming*, p. 218.

grass and two rabbits fighting for it." "Between Holkham and Lynn," writes Mrs. Stirling, "not a single ear of wheat was to be seen, and it was believed that not one would grow. . . . The sheep were a wretched breed, and owing to the absence of fodder no milch cows were kept on any of the farms." This wilderness was converted by the skill and energy and capital of Coke into a smiling and productive paradise. During his tenure of the property (1776-1842) Coke expended on improvements, exclusive of the sums spent on his own mansion and domain, no less than £536,992. And never was capital more productively applied. Robert Owen, of New Lanark, one of the many celebrities who attended the Holkham sheep-shearings, draws, in his autobiography, a vivid picture of this instructive gathering and of the genial host. "Mr. Coke," he writes, "was no ordinary man. . . . Being accustomed in my own proceedings to great order and systematic arrangement on an extensive scale, I was yet surprised to witness the order and arrangement of Mr. Coke's proceedings day after day. . . . He told us that when he came into possession of the Holkham estate it was let at 3s. per acre. This price he thought too low, and he required an advance of 2s. per acre. . . . And he told us he was then receiving 25s. an acre from the whole estate from farmers who had become wealthy while paying that rent; and that the income of the estate had risen from a low figure<sup>1</sup> to an income exceeding £50,000 a year."

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Rigby (cited by Prothero, *English Farming*, p. 217), writing in 1816, states that in that year the annual rental of Holkham was £20,000, having risen from £2,200 in 1776. This tallies roughly with the first half of Robert Owen's statement, but is difficult to reconcile with the second half.

What were the means employed to obtain these wonderful results? The first was close and continuous personal attention to the business of agriculture. From early morning till late evening, year in year out, Coke was at work upon the farms in hand. The second was incessant experiment and innovation. "He tested," writes Mr. Prothero, "every novelty himself, and offered to his neighbours only the results of his own successful experience. It was thus that the practice of drilling turnips and wheat, the value of sainfoin, swedes, mangel wurzel and potatoes were forced on the notice of Norfolk farmers." In this and many other ways he applied the results of advanced science to the practice of agriculture. By improving the rotation of crops; by the application of marl and clay to thin sand; by the judicious use of artificial organic manures; by the general use of the drill, good crops of wheat and other cereals and roots were obtained from "impossible" land. Grass lands were cultivated with equal assiduity, and the breed of live-stock was improved. After many experiments he decided that Devon cattle and Southdown sheep were best adapted to the district.

Not less important, in Coke's eyes, than the improvement of agricultural methods was the cultivation of good relations between landlord and tenant. He was, indeed, never tired of insisting that the interests of landlord and tenant were identical. To good tenants he granted long leases, at moderate rents, with few restrictive covenants, and so long as the farming was satisfactory the leases were renewed without fines. Thus the toasts annually given at the Holkham sheep-shearings were something more than merely complimentary; they expressed with

accuracy the maxims by which Coke guided the administration of a great trust: "A good understanding between landlord and tenant"; "Long leases to good tenants"; "The plough, and a good use of it"; "Liberal landlords and grateful tenants"; "Live and let live."

Conventional compliments became in this way the declaration of deliberate policy and the grateful acknowledgment of mutual obligations.

A certain school of academic writers would have us believe that agricultural "improvement" was but a synonym for the depopulation of the villages and the pauperisation of the peasantry. To such theorists the ounce of fact contained in the story of Coke's life as an "improving" landlord may be commended. In twenty years (1790-1810) Coke was said to have been "directly instrumental in bringing into tillage not less than 2,000,000 acres of waste land"<sup>1</sup>—some of it reclaimed from the sea. In 1776 10,000 quarters of wheat was *imported* into Wells; in 1818 11,000 quarters was *exported*. During the same period the population of Holkham increased from under 200 to 1,100; not a pauper remained on the estate, and the poor-house was razed to the ground. Even in the terrible years 1815-17, perhaps the worst crisis through which English agriculture ever passed, Coke's system triumphantly stood the strain. Thus, in 1816, the Duke of Bedford—himself one of the most enlightened landlords of the day—wrote to Coke: "Norfolk is at this moment a splendid exception to the rest of the kingdom, and you must derive infinite satisfaction in the reflection that thirty-eight years of persevering and unwearied efforts in promoting a beneficial system of husbandry

<sup>1</sup> The figures are almost incredible, but Mrs. Stirling, from whom I quote them (*op. cit.* p. 190), gives her authorities.

should have created such a mass of capital among the tenantry of Norfolk as to enable them to bear up against the evils which are overwhelming every part of the Empire."

It has seemed worth while to draw attention to the work of "Coke of Norfolk," as one of the best concrete examples of the agricultural revolution effected in the eighteenth century. That revolution was due, almost entirely, to the persistent and well-directed efforts of a group of enlightened landlords—such as Coke himself, Lord Townshend at Raynham, Lord Rockingham at Wentworth, the Duke of Bedford at Woburn, and others. But how, it may be asked, did such improvements react upon the tenure of land and upon the mutual relations of the several classes engaged in its cultivation? In a word, how did economic improvements affect the evolution of the land system?

This question brings us face to face with one of the most difficult and one of the most controversial problems involved in a study of the agrarian history of England. To a discussion of that problem the next section will be devoted.

### § 3. THE ENCLOSURE MOVEMENT OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

"The Goths and Vandals of open-field farmers must die out before any improvement can take place."—ARTHUR YOUNG.

"Enclosure was fatal to three classes: the small farmer, the cottager, and the squatter. To all of these classes their common rights were worth more than anything they received in return."

J. L. AND B. HAMMOND.

"When we pass over the lands which have undergone this happy change, we are enchanted as with the appearance of a new colony. Harvests, flocks, and smiling habitations have succeeded to the sadness and sterility of the desert. Happy conquests of peaceful industry! noble aggrandisements, which inspire no alarms and provoke no enemies!"—JEREMY BENTHAM.

"Where then, ah ! where shall poverty reside,  
To 'scape the pressure of contiguous pride?  
If to some common's fenceless limits strayed  
He drives his flock to pick the scanty blade,  
Those fenceless fields the sons of wealth divide,  
And e'en the bare worn common is denied."

GOLDSMITH, *Deserted Village*.

The facts disclosed by the history of the enclosure movement are viewed from opposite angles by different historians and are very variously interpreted. Nor was it otherwise with contemporary observers. The quotations prefixed to this section are typical of these contradictory criticisms. And the divergence is not unintelligible. The ultimate verdict must depend on the balancing of many considerations, not always or easily reconcilable. The aggregate interests of the nation at large may sometimes conflict with the interests of particular localities, still more with those of particular individuals. One writer or observer may attach primary importance to the social contentment of the small landowner, or farmer, or labourer. Another may rather have regard to the feeding of the urban operatives. A third may look at the matter from the point of view of national security, and so on. This is pre-eminently true in regard to the question of eighteenth-century enclosures. Few questions have excited, and still excite, more passion, not to say more prejudice, alike among publicists and peasants. For rural traditions are singularly tenacious. There are probably few villages in England where one may not hear to-day the tale of hardships suffered, of rights extinguished, of wrongs, real or imagined, inflicted under the enclosure awards of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. It is clear, therefore, that it is necessary to use the greatest

possible caution in interpreting the facts and in drawing inferences from them.

Nor is it easy to ascertain with precision the facts themselves. As to one fact, however, there can hardly be dispute. To all scientific advance in agriculture and to all effective improvement there existed in the first half of the eighteenth century an almost insurmountable barrier—the immense area of “open fields” and the existence of a vast amount of “waste.” Mr. Prothero estimates that in 1727 half the tillage land of the country—some 5,250,000 acres, was in open fields, and that so late as 1794 out of 8,500 parishes, 4,500 were still farmed in common. “Out of 84,000 acres of arable land in Bedfordshire, 24,000 were in open fields. In the 147,000 arable acres of Cambridgeshire, 132,000 were tilled in common; out of 438,000 acres in Berkshire, 220,000 were similarly cultivated. . . . From the northern point of Derbyshire to the extremity of Northumberland a line might be drawn for 150 miles as the crow flies which passed across nothing but wastes.”<sup>1</sup> The system was an archaic survival and an obstacle to all progress. “Never,” says Arthur Young, “were more miserable crops seen than all the spring ones in the common fields.” The same cautious writer has summarised with admirable force the objections to the system: The most progressive farmer could go no faster than the obscurantist and the drone. No proper rotation of crops was feasible; no turnips or artificial grasses could be grown; consequently, there could be no winter keep for cattle and no sheep-farming on a scientific method. The strips, as we have seen in a previous chapter, were so distributed that much time was lost by

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Quarterly Review*, No. 431, p. 444, and *Pioneers and Progress of English Farming*, p. 56.



the labourers "in travelling to many dispersed pieces of land from one end of a parish to another." "I know one acre," writes one of the reporters to the Board of Agriculture, "which is divided into eight lands, and spread over a large common field, so that a man must travel two or three miles to visit it all. But though this is a remarkable instance of minute division, yet it takes place to such a degree as very much to impede all the processes of husbandry. But this is not the worst: the lands shooting different ways, some serve as headlands to turn on in ploughing others; and frequently when the good manager has sown his corn, and it is come up, his slovenly neighbour turns upon it, and cuts up more for him than his own is worth. It likewise makes one occupier subservient to another in cropping his land; and in water furrowing, one sloven may keep the water on, and poison the lands of two or three industrious neighbours."

Such instances were common enough. Small wonder, therefore, that there were perpetual disputes and not infrequent litigation as to rights of pasturage in the stubble and the common meadows, and as to boundaries. In some fields there were not even grass "balks" to divide plot from plot, and men, says Arthur Young, "would plough by night to steal a furrow from their neighbours."<sup>1</sup> "Without the agreement of a large body of ignorant and suspicious occupiers," says Mr. Prothero, "no change could be introduced. . . . The strips of land were too narrow to admit of cross-ploughing or cross-harrowing. Drainage was practically impossible, for, if one man drained or water-furrowed his land or

<sup>1</sup> Readers of Lady Verney's illuminating essays on *Peasant Properties* in France will recall many similar instances of jealousy and litigiousness.

scoured his courses, his neighbour's negligence stopped his outfalls. . . . If one occupier tilled his strip cleanly he was at the mercy of a slovenly neighbour; the fallow left its triennial heritage of nettles, docks, and thistles. . . . Vexatious rights hindered proper cultivation." And this was the system which many academic writers represent as idyllic! The grim reality was far otherwise. Common sense would have demanded reform: the coincidence of the Industrial Revolution and the French war necessitated abolition.

The sovereign remedy prescribed by the experts was "enclosure." But "enclosure," it is important to remember, assumed two forms, and was promoted with two distinct objects. It might be applied to the open arable fields or to the "waste," and it might be designed either to promote tillage or to extend pasturage. Down to 1760 the rate of enclosure was not rapid.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Johnson puts the total acreage—including both arable and waste—at 312,363,<sup>2</sup> and he agrees with Mr. Prothero in thinking that down to this time, at any rate, enclosure was mainly promoted for the improvement of stock-breeding and the extension of pasture. Dr. Slater, on the contrary, maintains that throughout the eighteenth century both forms of enclosure proceeded with tolerable regularity; that in some parts of the country they were converting open arable into enclosed pasture, while in others they were putting common pasture and waste under the plough; and that in this way the balance was fairly maintained. Be this as it may, it is certain that one of the

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Slater, who has worked over the whole subject with great minuteness and care, holds that there was very little variation in the rate of enclosure from 1670 until the height of the Napoleonic Wars.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 90. Mr. Prothero's estimate (*Pioneers*, p. 257) is 338,177.

leading motives for enclosure was the extension and improvement of sheep-breeding, and that so far as this motive operated enclosure necessarily involved the consolidation of farms and the contraction of employment. It was the process of the sixteenth century repeated in the eighteenth. This is the picture made so familiar by the pathetic pen of Oliver Goldsmith, whose *Deserted Village* was published in 1770.

The period of wholesale Parliamentary enclosure is coincident with the reign of George III. (1760-1820). During that reign no less than 3,209 Private Enclosure Bills were approved by Parliament, and, under those Acts, 6,288,910 acres were enclosed.<sup>1</sup> Not only was the process more rapid than in the earlier period; the whole movement differed in its motive and in its effects. Probably after 1760, certainly after 1790, the main object was the breaking up of grass land for tillage. The new urban populations did not despise mutton, but their primary necessity was bread. And another factor was by this time in operation: cotton was rapidly displacing wool as the most important of our textile industries.

At this point it is necessary to face a further question. What was the effect of these later enclosures upon the labour market? In this respect two results must be carefully discriminated. On the one hand, so far as enclosure meant the tillage of land which had previously been under grass, it increased the demand for agricultural labour and tended to raise wages; and, in fact, money wages did rise in the last years of the century. But on the other hand, the conversion of open into

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Prothero, *Pioneers* appendix. Mr. Johnson's (*op. cit.* p. 96) estimate is nearly 25 per cent. less. Dr. Slater's view is that Mr. Prothero overestimates the extent of *Parliamentary* enclosures, but underestimates the *total* amount enclosed.

enclosed arable fields for improved tillage tended to economy of labour.<sup>1</sup> According to a Report of the Board of Agriculture (1808) it was reckoned that a thousand acres of rich arable land employed twenty families before enclosure, and only five after it.<sup>2</sup> From the general economic standpoint no testimony to the advantages of enclosure could be more conclusive; as to its disadvantages from the point of view of labour, no facts could speak more eloquently. Bentham, it is clear, spoke somewhat too confidently when he referred to enclosures as "happy conquests of peaceful industry, noble aggrandisements which inspire no claim and provoke no enemies." But to the enmity aroused reference will be made later.

After 1820 the pace perceptibly slackened. Only 340,380 acres were enclosed in George IV.'s reign, and only 236,070 in the following decade (1830-40). In all, it is computed that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries over eight and a quarter million acres were enclosed. By 1876 the force of the movement was completely spent. The growth of towns, the progress of hygienic science, the quickening of æsthetic sensibilities, the democratisation of government—all combined to induce a new attitude towards the enclosure of "commons" and "open spaces." The result was that between 1876 and 1902 only seventy-nine applications for enclosures were made, and of these about fifty were rejected. Plainly, the enclosure movement had reached its term.

<sup>1</sup> The whole question of the effect of enclosure upon population has been examined with minute care by Mr. Gonner (*op. cit.*), whose conclusion is that there is "really no evidence of depopulation" (p. 443).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Slater, *op. cit.* p. 96.

## § 4. THE DECAY OF THE YEOMANRY

"Of the freeholders of England there are more in extent and richer than in any other country in Europe."

CHAMBERLAYNE, *Present State of England*, 1669.

"The beneficial effect (of enclosure) on farming taken as a whole is undoubted. . . . Nor does the accusation of general arbitrary or unfair treatment of the small farmer or the poor owner appear to me tenable."  
—E. G. K. GONNER.

"On social grounds the removal of the small proprietors was a deplorable necessity. But the alternative was the starvation of millions of artisans."—R. E. PROTHERO.

We must now attempt an estimate of the broad results of the enclosure movement upon the social and tenurial economy. The popular belief is quite unambiguous. It persists in the conclusion that it was this movement which destroyed the ancient "yeomanry" of England. When we descend, however, from general statements to precise details, much greater difficulties reveal themselves. At first sight even expert opinion seems lacking in consistency. Thus, one of the most cautious and competent of recent critics writes of enclosure as "a serious disadvantage to the small landowner." And again, "Both directly and indirectly enclosure tended to divorce the poor man from the soil." But, on the other hand, we read that "a great many (small owners), more than is usually supposed, survived the Napoleonic wars"; that there was an actual increase in the number of occupying owners during the years 1785-1802, and that the really critical period in the history of the small landowner was that between 1680 and 1750, *i.e.* in a period when the enclosure movement was relatively unimportant.<sup>1</sup> The more precise and careful the investigation, the more the mystery seems to thicken.

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.* pp. 100, 105, 121, 144.

I incline, however, to the belief that much of the confusion has arisen from the use of a term with picturesque and romantic associations. Bishop Stubbs was wont to say that the Renaissance loomed much larger in academic exercises than ever it had in historical reality. Something of the same fate seems to have overtaken the term *yeoman*. The causes of the disappearance of this interesting class have formed the theme of endless academic disputations. In popular literature, again, the substantive is almost invariably accompanied by an epithet such as "stout" or "substantial," suggestive of genial national characteristics. But neither academic essayists nor popular writers have been invariably careful to define the terms they employ. The truth is that the term "yeoman" is used in different senses by different writers, and, what is worse, in different senses by the same writers. In the strict sense it excludes both lessors and lessees, and applies solely to small landowners who, in Macaulay's phrase, "cultivated their own fields with their own hands." This is the sense in which the term is invariably used by Arthur Young. On the other hand, Adam Smith—a contemporary of Young's—uses the term as broadly synonymous with "farmer," and he was not without warrant. Bishop Latimer, it will be remembered, in a passage quoted above, referred to his father as "a yeoman who had no land of his own," and paid £4 a year rent for his holding. Bacon defined yeomen very loosely as "the middle people between gentlemen and peasants," while Blackstone accepted the term as synonymous with "all duly qualified rural voters," *i.e.* 40s. freeholders, a term which certainly included "lessees for life," if not others. But the man who more than any other individual must be

held responsible for the popular tradition as to the "decay of the yeomanry" is Gregory King (1696), who, with an appearance of precision, entirely delusive, estimated the rural population of England at the close of the seventeenth century as follows:

Nobles, clergy, gentlemen, etc.	26,586
Larger freeholders . . . . .	40,000
Lesser freeholders . . . . .	140,000
Farmers &c. . . . .	150,000

An exceptionally competent critic has characterised Gregory King's estimate as a "vaguely expressed guess."<sup>1</sup> But few statements have ever obtained wider currency, and it is no exaggeration to say that on his vague and unsupported testimony an immense argumentative structure has been erected. The first step in the process of construction was, quite unwarrantably, to translate "freeholder" into occupying-owner; the second was to identify occupying-owner with "yeoman," and then proceed to affirm that these "yeomen" were extinguished by the enclosure movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

That in this contention there is a considerable element of truth cannot be denied; but as a scientific statement it lacks precision, and as a popular generalisation it is apt to provoke misconception.

Precision is, indeed, very difficult to obtain, but the essence of the matter, so far as I have been able to discern it, would seem to be substantially as follows. Down to the time of the agrarian changes of the eighteenth century our rural economy contained a large number of "mid-

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of Political Economy*, s.v. Yeoman, an admirable piece of critical analysis.

ding folk," not gentlemen entitled to a crest, and not peasants. Some of them were "freeholders" in the strict sense, many of them were copyholders and tenants for lives. By 1832<sup>1</sup> many of these had disappeared.

The main reasons for their disappearance have been already set forth. They were partly social, partly political, but predominantly economic. On the one hand, everyone who desired to take an active part in the government, either central or local, everyone who aspired to a place in the social hierarchy, had to qualify by the possession of a considerable amount of landed property. This in itself induced the wealthy to purchase, and, by forcing up the price, tempted the poor to sell. On the other hand, the rapid progress of agricultural science, and the increasing pressure of population upon the native means of subsistence, necessitated the consolidation of arable strips in the open fields and the enclosure of the waste. Enclosure—in the twofold sense—ultimately resulted in the elimination of the small farmer, whether he was freeholder, copyholder, leaseholder, or tenant at will—and in the degradation and pauperisation of the cottar and labourer. Without enterprise, skill, or capital the small man could not, under the stress of competition, hold his own against the big man equipped with all three. But the small man had never lived entirely by agriculture. And if it was the agricultural revolution which dealt him his first severe blow, it was the manufacturing revolution which finally knocked him out of time. Deprived of the subsidiary profits of his spinning-wheel and hand-loom, he was compelled for the first time to specialise. He had been half

<sup>1</sup> I select, somewhat arbitrarily, the date which marks the end of the "eighteenth" century in a political sense.



farmer, half manufacturer; he was now obliged to become wholly the one or wholly the other. Not a few of the yeomen sold their little properties, and with the capital thus realised started work as manufacturers. Some of them, like the Peels and the Arkwrights, acquired large fortunes by the exchange. Others, having sold their freeholds, remained upon the land as tenants at will.<sup>1</sup> Others, again, spiritless and encumbered, sank to the position of wage-paid labourers.

The question of encumbrances is not unimportant in helping us to fix more precise dates for the various stages of the revolution. So long as times were good and the price of agricultural produce was rising, encumbrances mattered comparatively little. The real crisis came with the rapid fall in prices which followed immediately upon the conclusion of the peace in 1815. Between 1808 and 1813 wheat averaged over 100s. a quarter; in the summer of 1813 it touched 171s.; in 1816 the price fell to 52s. 6d.

Thus, the years after 1815 marked the fatal period alike for the small landowner and the small tenant who had no reserve of capital. And this was the opportunity for the big man. Nor was it neglected.

The Board of Agriculture, in 1816, issued a circular letter with the object of eliciting information as to the nature and extent of the depression which was undoubtedly widely prevalent.<sup>2</sup> The answers contain a fund of information, and amply attest the severity of the crisis. Instead of the fierce competition for farms which, during the war, had been the rule, farmers were handing in notices to quit and many farms were unlet; credit was collapsing; mortgagees found it impossible

<sup>1</sup> This point is strongly emphasised by Mr. Gonner (*op. cit.* p. 378).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Annual Register*, 1816, pp. 459-69 (Chronicle).

to realise; banks suspended payment; substantial farmers were compelled to seek relief from the parish. Only the strongest could weather the storm, and many vessels went on the rocks of bankruptcy. "In Dorsetshire, for instance, fifty-two farmers, cultivating between them 24,000 acres, failed between 1815 and 1820. Rents were lowered in Somersetshire by a third. . . . In Sussex, again, rents fell upon an average 53 per cent. . . . Numerous tradesmen, innkeepers, shopkeepers who depended upon the farmers for their principal custom, were involved in the same ruin. War prices," as Mr. Prothero pertinently adds, "were gone, war taxes remained."<sup>1</sup> These distressful years sorely tried the small farmer and completed the annihilation of the small proprietor. Out of the welter the modern agricultural economy emerged: holdings were consolidated; ownership was concentrated in comparatively few hands; the inequalities of the old agricultural surface were reduced; tenure was simplified; excrescences were removed, and the system with which we are familiar—great proprietors, capitalist tenants, landless labourers—was definitely established.

Of the labourer nothing has yet been said. How had the agricultural revolution affected his position? A considerable number of writers have lately contrived to invest the answer to this question with a good deal of passion and prejudice. The facts may be stated with accuracy, and yet the final picture impressed upon the mind of the reader may nevertheless be distorted and out of perspective. Nothing which can excite prejudice against the "ruling oligarchy" is omitted; no space is found for other conditioning factors in the problem without

<sup>1</sup> Prothero, *Pioneers*, p. 91.

reference to which its bearings cannot be appreciated. Thus enormous emphasis is laid on the disastrous effects of enclosure upon the position of the cottar and labourer. And rightly. It would, indeed, be difficult to exaggerate the degradation of the lowest ranks in the agricultural community during the last years of the eighteenth and the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Even Arthur Young admits the injury done to the poor. "By nineteen out of twenty Enclosure Bills the poor are injured, and some grossly injured. The poor in these parishes may say with truth, 'All I know is that I had a cow and an Act of Parliament has taken it from me.' A man will love his country better even for a pig." But while all this is true and ought to be emphasised, yet two further observations seem to be pertinent and called for. First: the accusations of fraud and violence cannot be sustained. "The work," says Mr. Gonner, "appears to have been honestly if not always well done, and to have been marked by a rough and ready fairness."<sup>1</sup> Secondly: on the broad question as to the economic necessity of enclosure the last word surely has been said by the present Marquis of Lincolnshire (lately President of the Board of Agriculture). "Whatever reasons," he wrote, "there may be for regretting the enclosure of our Common Fields, and for wishing that the interests of the humbler tillers of the soil had been more sedulously guarded on enclosure, in the main the process was inevitable."<sup>2</sup>

The interests of the humblest class were, however, affected far less by the enclosure of the open arable fields than by the enclosure of the waste. In regard to the latter the difficulty

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Lord Carrington, *op. cit.* (1906).

of dealing adequately with the labourer was twofold. First, in many cases his "rights" were based merely upon usage, not upon law. Frequently, therefore, they could not be ascertained, still less enforced. Secondly, where they were recognised the compensation awarded, though not necessarily unjust in amount, could not really compensate for the loss of grazing and turbary rights, still less for the sense of social stability and economic independence which the enjoyment of these rights conferred.

The deterioration in the labourer's position, begun by the economic revolution of the eighteenth century, was completed in the early years of the nineteenth by the administration of the old Poor Law. During the first half of the reign of George III. little fault can be found with the administration of poor relief. The initial lapse from sound principles was marked by the passing of Gilbert's Act in 1782. By this Act the overseers were permitted, though not obliged, to give outdoor relief to the able-bodied. The breach thus effected was enlarged by the Act of 1796. The workhouse test, imposed in 1722, was abolished, work was to be found for the unemployed, and inadequate wages were to be supplemented from the rates. Thus did the State follow the pernicious example of the Speenhamland magistrates. The motives which inspired this policy may have been purely philanthropic, but the Berkshire magistrates and those who, in pity or panic, followed their lead, inscribed upon the page of English economic history a passage which no one can read without a sense of humiliation. Even in the midst of a political crisis so acute as that occasioned by the French Revolution; even in an economic crisis so severe and prolonged as that which resulted from the coincidence of the

industrial and agrarian revolutions, statesmanship might surely have availed to avert some of the worse consequences of misguided philanthropy. But the statesmanship was lacking, and the result was the pauperisation and degradation of the peasants of southern England. The annual expenditure on poor relief, which in 1760 was £1,250,000, averaged during the last five years of the reign (1816-20) over £7,000,000, or 13s. 4d. per head of the population. In some parishes the rates exceeded 20s. in the £. The results were disastrous. Land went out of cultivation; farms were thrown up; landlords, farmers and labourers were involved in a common ruin, while the urban population were crying out for bread. And it is safe to say that the economic burden thrown upon the community was the least of the evils which resulted from this suicidal policy. The evil effects of the old Poor Law are, however, too painfully notorious to require, or even to justify, more than a passing reference. But its influence upon the evolution of the modern agrarian economy must not be ignored.

To conclude. No one looking back upon the history of the eighteenth century can fail to lament both the disappearance of the small proprietor and the degradation of the landless labourer. Nevertheless, historical justice compels us to approve, on broad grounds, of the changes to which both were unfortunately sacrificed. Was the sacrifice inevitable? Might not the disadvantages incidental to open-field farming have been remedied without the expropriation of the small proprietors? Could not the agricultural improvements have been effected without the concentration of the whole landed property in England into relatively few hands? If the thing had to be done again to-day, would it be done in the same way? "The

question which our forefathers had to decide was whether the few should suffer or the many starve."<sup>1</sup> Is the dilemma fairly stated? No impartial historian can answer these questions quite confidently. But two admissions must certainly be made. It is true that the interests of the many who had to be fed happened to coincide with those of the possessing classes; that the feeding of the many brought wealth to the great landlords. It is also true that in the process of enclosure more regard ought to have been paid to the interests of the smaller folk, even where those interests were not actually protected by law. Considerations of the general good may have demanded that to them that had, more should be given; but it can hardly be doubted that it was given with unnecessary generosity. The open-field system had to disappear; enclosure of the arable was inevitable. The line of least resistance—in an economic sense—was undoubtedly that which was actually followed. But although concentration of estates was the natural, it was not the only possible outcome of enclosure. Had it not been for the coincidence of the great war, the process might have been much more gradual, and some of the more lamentable effects might have been mitigated if not averted. But given the contemporary conditions, exceptional and unfortunate, it is difficult to resist Mr. Prothero's conclusion that while "on social grounds the removal of the small proprietors was a deplorable necessity," yet "the alternative was the starvation of millions of artisans."

<sup>1</sup> *Quarterly Review*, No. 431, p. 453.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CHANGES AND CHANCES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

"The present distribution of landed property in England is in the main due to the system of political government which made us a free people."—ARNOLD TOYNBEE.

#### § 1. PEACE WITHOUT PLENTY, 1815-1837

WHEN the great war ended in 1815, the evolution of the English land system was virtually complete. The agrarian hierarchy, as we know it, had definitely emerged. The great landed estates had been consolidated; the village "community" had been dissolved; the common arable fields had been enclosed, and much of the common pasture and waste as well; the yeomen, except in a few districts, had disappeared; copyhold tenure was coming to be regarded as an archaic survival; the cottars had lost or sacrificed most of their "common" rights. Henceforward the typical rural community was to consist of a great landed proprietor, a small group of substantial tenant-farmers, and a considerable number of land-less, wage-paid labourers, living either in the farm-houses or in cottages. This arrangement is still, in the main, intact.

The nineteenth century witnessed no such fundamental changes as those which distinguished

the three critical periods which formed the subject of the three preceding chapters. But the existing régime is now definitely challenged. It seems, therefore, desirable to sketch briefly the fortunes of English agriculture under this régime, and to examine the various proposals which have been made for its alteration.

The history of English agriculture since the close of the great war divides broadly into three periods: (i) from 1815 to 1837—a period of profound depression; (ii) from 1837 to 1875—a period of unprecedented prosperity; and (iii) from 1875 to 1900—a period of almost unmitigated gloom. Upon the characteristic features of each of these periods, and upon the causes which alternately contributed to depression and prosperity, something must now be said.

During the years which intervened between the Battle of Waterloo and the accession of Queen Victoria the new agrarian system was put to a severe strain. It was a period of profound and general depression alike in agriculture, commerce, and industry. In one sense the depression represented merely the recoil after a period of unprecedented and inflated prosperity. Unhealthy inflation is the frequent if not the invariable accompaniment of war, and reaction is as salutary as it is inevitable. But in this case the recoil was exceptionally severe and unusually prolonged. Similar depression had followed upon the conclusion of peace in 1763, and again on that of 1783. But in neither case was distress so acute or so protracted. Nor is the reason far to seek. The French Wars 1793-1815 were not only exceptional in duration, not only did they involve a financial strain absolutely without precedent,



they coincided also with an economic revolution to which history affords no parallel. However beneficial in its ultimate effects, that revolution must needs have produced temporary dislocation in the labour market and consequent distress among the poor. But the coincidence of the war partly concealed, partly postponed, and ultimately intensified the economic and social results of the industrial revolution. Consequently, when the recoil came, after 1815, it involved intense and prolonged suffering to all classes.

The financial burden imposed upon Great Britain by the French War was terribly severe. The sum annually raised by taxation during the war period (1793-1815) averaged no less than £65,000,000 a year; in the last two years of war the expenditure exceeded £105,000,000. During the same period the public debt increased from £239,663,421 to £831,171,132, and the annual charge for interest and management from about £9,500,000 to over £31,000,000. And this burden rested upon a population of 19,000,000.

Until the last years of the war it had been cheerfully sustained. But after 1810 several reasons combined to darken the economic prospect. Not the least important was Napoleon's Continental System. That system pressed, indeed, most heavily upon Napoleon's own subjects and his allies; but after 1810 its rigours were intensified, and the results were increasingly felt in this country. The war with the United States of America (1812-14) also seriously interfered with foreign trade, and, at home, a series of exceptionally bad harvests deepened the prevailing gloom.

Nor was the strain relieved by wise financial administration. Pitt's policy of raising his loans at a nominally low rate of interest (3 per cent.),

and, therefore, at a very heavy discount,<sup>1</sup> has not escaped censure from financial experts. If he had raised the money at something more closely approximating to the market rate he would not have added appreciably to the burden of contemporaries, and he would have bequeathed to posterity a lighter load of capital responsibilities. His successors adhered to his policy, and with far less intelligence. Vansittart, for example, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1812 to 1823, was so incredibly foolish as to borrow money to maintain intact his sinking fund.

Currency disturbances increased commercial confusion. Cash payments had been suspended at the Bank of England since 1797, but for some years the issue of inconvertible paper was kept within reasonable bounds, and the inconvenience, therefore, was minimised. But by 1810 there were £25,000,000 of notes in circulation and the premium on gold had risen to £8 7s. 8d.. Three years later (1813) it was £29 4s. 1d.; in 1815 it fell back to £13 9s. 6d.; in other words, the gold value of a £5 note, which in 1813 had been about £3 10s., rose again to £4 6s. Such violent fluctuations reduced trade and agriculture to a mere gamble. Long contracts were impossible; no one could look ahead for six months; neither landlords nor tenants, merchants nor manufacturers, could tell even from day to day where they stood. Wheat, in particular, was subject to extreme oscillations in price. In the summer of 1813 it touched 171s. a quarter; before Christmas of the same year it had fallen to 75s.; in 1815 it averaged 65s. 7d., in 1817, 96s. 11d., and in 1822 44s. 7d. No industry could stand up against oscillations so violent.

<sup>1</sup> Between 1803 and 1815 the average rate at which 3 per cent. stock was issued was £60 7s. 6d.

Commerce and industry were in a wretched plight. During the war, foreign trade had expanded with astonishing rapidity, and Great Britain had secured something like a monopoly both of manufactures and of the carrying trade, for a great part of the civilised world. With the conclusion of peace there came a sudden cessation of demand, a rapid fall in prices, a glut in the labour market, and much unemployment and distress. "The citizens," wrote the Master of the Mint, "have lost all their feelings of pride and richness and flourishing fatness, trade is gone, contracts are gone, paper credit is gone, and there is nothing but stoppage, retrenchments, and bankruptcies." Wellesley-Pole certainly did not exaggerate the gravity of the situation.

If the condition of trade was bad, that of agriculture was worse. Reference has been already made to the information elicited by the Board of Agriculture in answer to the circular letter issued in 1816.<sup>1</sup> From all parts there came the same tale of depression. Rents which had been unduly inflated by war prices came down with a run; tenants threw up their farms; land was going out of cultivation; banks suspended payment, and an appalling number of bankruptcies were registered. "I assure you," wrote a county member to Creevey, "the landed people are getting *desperate*; the universality of ruin among them, or distress bordering on it, is *absolutely* unparalleled."<sup>2</sup>

In the hope of averting widespread ruin among all classes of agriculturists, the Legislature intervened, and in 1815 prohibited the importation of foreign wheat so long as the price was under 80s. a quarter. Hitherto the purpose which inspired the enactment of Corn Laws had been not so

<sup>1</sup> *Supra*, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> February 17, 1816.

much protective as regulative. The Act of 1689, for example, provided for a bounty of 5s. when wheat fell below 48s. a quarter; the Act of 1773 permitted free importation when the price rose above 48s. The object of the eighteenth-century Parliaments was "to prevent grain from being at any time either so dear that the poor cannot subsist, or so cheap that the farmer cannot live by growing it," and in both objects it succeeded tolerably well. Until the great war the price of wheat rarely fell (on the year's average) below 35s. and still more rarely rose above 50s.

The Act of 1815 marked, however, a new departure in the history of the English Corn Laws. It was frankly protective in motive, and was meant to save the agricultural interest from impending ruin. For this purpose it was almost wholly ineffective. It did not even avail to steady prices. In 1817 wheat touched 117s.; in 1822, after an abundant harvest, it was selling for a time at 38s.; and while the Act reduced agriculture to a gamble, it aroused bitter and just resentment among the industrial and commercial classes. To mitigate its worst effects, Peel introduced in 1828 a sliding scale of duties with the object of keeping the price of wheat steady at about 70s. a quarter. But the experiment was not successful: it still further encouraged speculative trade; it demoralised the producer, and failed to relieve the consumer. Peel, nevertheless, persisted in attempting a variation of the experiment in 1842, without appreciable result. But we are anticipating events.

The clouds of agricultural depression lifted temporarily in 1822, in sympathy with the general revival in commerce and industry; but farmers, traders, and manufacturers were again shrouded in profound gloom by the financial crisis of 1825—

26. The recovery had, in the previous three years, been too rapid. Manufacturers, taking, as is their wont, short views, imagined that the boom was going to be permanent and plunged into wild speculation.

During the year 1824 and the early part of 1825 no less than £174,000,000 of capital was subscribed for new enterprises. In this case, financial knavery accentuated the effects of over-sanguine but honest trading.

The phenomena with which recurring cycles of trade have now made us painfully familiar quickly manifested themselves. The markets were glutted; over-production led to cessation of demand; the banks called in their paper, and credit was woefully shaken.

On December 5, 1825, the great banking house of Sir Peter Pole & Co. suspended payment, and within the next few weeks seventy-eight banks followed their example. The shock to credit was appalling, and widespread ruin ensued.

As regards agriculture, the tale of the years 1813-37 is one of all but unbroken monotony. The severity of the depression and its duration are alike attested by the fact that Select Committees were appointed to examine the condition of agriculture in 1820, 1821, 1822, 1833, and 1836. "Rural conditions," writes Mr. Prothero, "were deplorable. Even as late as 1833 it was stated that, in spite of rent reductions which in Sussex amounted to 53 per cent., there was scarcely a solvent tenant in the Wealds of Sussex and Kent, and that many farmers, having lost all they had, were working on the roads."<sup>1</sup> But by 1836 the clouds were beginning to lift, and before the new reign was far advanced the landed interest was once again basking in the sun of prosperity.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 324.

The causes of this remarkable revival and the features by which it was distinguished will be examined in the next section.

§ 2. THE GOLDEN AGE OF ENGLISH FARMING,  
1837-1875

The turn of the tide in English agriculture coincided roughly with the accession of Queen Victoria. After a long and wearisome period of depression, agriculture was at last beginning to adjust itself to the new conditions. Landlords no longer looked for the inflated rents characteristic of the war period; those who had purchased land under the delusion that the halcyon days were going to last for ever were learning to make the best of a bad investment, and to accept a very moderate return on their capital.<sup>1</sup> Tenant farmers, abandoning the excitement of a highly speculative period, settled down to business of a more humdrum, but in the long run not less profitable, character. One of the most vexatious incidents of that business was removed by the passing, in 1836, of the Tithe Commutation Act. Henceforward the tithe-owner was entitled to demand not a tenth of the produce in kind, but a money payment calculated on the average prices of wheat, barley, and oats for the previous seven years, in fact a variable corn-rent.<sup>2</sup> In 1891 the responsibility for the payment of this corn-rent was transferred from the tenant to the owner,

<sup>1</sup> In the early years of the century land fetched as much as forty years' purchase.

<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested, and with plausibility, that the adoption of an average based on the prices of wheat, barley, and oats was intended, not to represent the previous payment in kind, but to afford a rudimentary "tabular standard" to correspond with the changes in the purchasing power of money.

and a cause of infinite irritation and friction was thus finally eliminated.

Not less advantageous to the farmers than the commutation of tithes was the amendment of the Poor Law by the Act of 1834. The gross abuses which had, for nearly forty years, characterised the administration of the law were utterly demolishing alike to employer and employed.<sup>1</sup> But it is clear that neither farmers nor labourers realised to the full the gravity of the mischief. The farmer imagined that he was getting part of his wages bill paid out of the rates; the labourer gleefully accepted his parish allowances as a dole, and put in no more work than he was actually paid for by the farmer. The people who suffered most severely from this iniquitous system were the few labourers who remained independent, and the long-suffering ratepayers. In some parishes the rates exceeded twenty shillings in the pound; land went out of cultivation, with ruinous results alike to landlords, farmers, and labourers.

The remedies applied by the Amending Act of 1834 were drastic, but not more drastic than the acuteness of the disease demanded. Willingness to enter the Poor-house was to be accepted as the test of destitution; out-door relief, in its bewildering variety of forms, was abolished for the able-bodied by a stroke of the pen; and regularity and uniformity were introduced into a chaotic system by a central Board of Commissioners armed with wide discretionary powers. The first Commissioners—"the bashaws of Somerset House"—incurred much unpopularity, not to say odium, but their efforts redeemed rural England from financial ruin and moral degradation. The poor-rates, which before 1834 reached the appalling total of £7,000,000, dropped

<sup>1</sup> See *supra*, p. 108.

in 1837 to £4,000,000; but it is safe to say that the financial relief thus afforded to southern England was the least of the benefits accruing from the amendment of the old Poor Law.

The reduction of local rates was accompanied by a sensible diminution in the burdens of taxation. Taxation which in 1815 had mounted up to £72,210,512 fell in 1840 to £47,567,565. There was a slight increase of expenditure after 1845, but the period between 1840 and 1875 is not only the golden age of English farming, but the golden age of English finance, and the connection between the two is more intimate than is commonly supposed. Let Chancellors of the Exchequer adjust the incidence as they may; let them attempt, as they will, to shift the burden from one class to another,—that burden must ultimately fall upon the productive industries, and the greatest of these is agriculture. Nor was agriculture slow to respond to the sound financial administration of Peel and his disciples.

Not that sound finance, Imperial and local, stood alone. Many things combined to contribute to the revival of agriculture in the forties and fifties. Primarily, perhaps, the amazing growth of demand for agricultural products, due to the development of manufacturing industries and the growth of population. Between 1801 and 1841 the population of the United Kingdom increased by 10,700,000 souls, and practically the whole people, numbering in the latter year 26,709,456, had to be fed on home-grown produce. Down to 1841 the amount of imported food-stuffs was indeed quite insignificant. Between 1801 and 1810 the import of wheat and wheat-flour averaged 600,946 quarters, or "a very small fraction above a peck for the annual consumption of each person." Between 1811 and 1820 the



imports fell to an annual average of 458,578 quarters; in the next decade they rose to 534,992 quarters, and in 1831-40 to 907,638, or about 2½ gallons per head of population.<sup>1</sup> As regards meat, the home producer, according to Porter, "during almost the whole period enjoyed a strict monopoly."<sup>2</sup>

Despite this, the prevailing note during the period had been, as we have seen, one of depression. English agriculture, however, slowly began to realise the sweet uses of adversity. The Scottish farmers, almost from the first, had recognised that the way to meet "bad times" was better farming, and slowly the English farmers learnt the same lesson. They learnt, too, that they could not rely upon the protection of the Corn Laws. "During the continuance of the Corn Laws," writes David Salomons, "the farmers have suffered the severest privations. The variations in price have been extreme, and when a supply of foreign corn has been required . . . it has not reached the consumer except at a very high price, whilst but little advantage has accrued to the revenue."<sup>3</sup> The farmers discovered that they must rely upon their own industry and ingenuity, if they were to make a decent living. The lesson was not thrown away, and the results are apparent in the period now under review.

General recourse was had to scientific and mechanical inventions; new fertilisers were brought into common use—Peruvian guano, for example, nitrate of soda, and superphosphate of lime—and were applied to various soils with scientific discrimination; machinery was intro-

<sup>1</sup> Porter, *Progress of the Nation* (ed. 1912), pp. 176, 177.

<sup>2</sup> In 1910 the value of imported food-stuffs amounted to £219,267,012; wheat and wheat-flour contributing to this total £49,671,789.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Tooke, *History of Prices*, iii. 32.

duced—drills, reaping machines, horse-rakes, hay-cutters, hay-makers, and on some large arable farms, even the steam-plough; better methods of drainage were devised; a new system of cropping was introduced; stock-breeding was elevated to the dignity of a fine art. To all these improvements in agricultural methods nothing contributed more powerfully than the foundation, in 1838, of the Royal Agricultural Society. The Society held its first show at Oxford in 1839, and was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1840. Queen Victoria herself became the Patron of the Society, and was a large and successful contributor to its exhibitions—an example followed by her two successors on the throne.

The year which saw the incorporation of the "Royal" was remarkable also for the publication of Liebig's epoch-making treatise, *Chemistry in its Application to Agriculture and Physiology*. Colleges for the provision of higher education in agriculture were established at Cirencester (1845) and other places, and about the same time Mr. (afterwards Sir) John Bennet Lawes established his famous experimental station at Rothamsted, and started at Deptford the manufacture of mineral superphosphate for manure. For more than half a century Lawes and his colleague, Sir Joseph Henry Gilbert, carried on a series of experiments the results of which were systematically formulated and published. By these experiments and reports Lawes and Gilbert rendered to the progress of English farming services of inestimable value.

Such were the means employed to raise English farming out of the slough of despond into which it had plunged after the close of the great war. War-prices had gone, and, luckily for the community, had gone never to return. So had war-

rentals. Neither was really a healthy symptom. By 1840, however, things had got on to a satisfactory basis, alike for landlord, tenant, and consumer. Rents, according to Porter, showed a general advance of over 100 per cent. as compared with 1790. Essex farms which in 1790 were rented at 10s. were in the early 'forties paying 20s. an acre, having in 1812 gone up to 45s. or 50s. In Berks and Wilts the net advance between 1790 and 1840 was 114 per cent., from 14s. to 30s., having been up to 50s. in the war. And it was the same in other parts of the kingdom. "With scarcely any exception, the revenue drawn in the form of rent from the ownership of the soil has been at least doubled in every part of Great Britain since 1790."<sup>1</sup> Prices were, from the producer's point of view, equally satisfactory. The price of wheat hardly ever averaged less than 50s. per quarter for any one year before 1849, and was generally substantially above that figure. The price of the 4-lb. loaf in London, between 1820 and 1840, occasionally went as low as 7d., and once up to 11d., but generally it was in the neighbourhood of 9d.—10d.<sup>2</sup>

Such was the condition of agriculture when Sir Robert Peel carried his famous series of Budgets, culminating in 1846 in the Act for the repeal of the Corn Laws. There is no need to retell the story of the Anti-Corn Law crusade, nor its dramatic dénouement.<sup>3</sup> It must suffice to remind the reader that when Peel came into power in the autumn of 1841 the country was passing through a grave social and economic

<sup>1</sup> Porter, *op. cit.* p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. White Paper 339, Return to order of the House of Commons August 7, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Morley, *Life of Cobden*; Trevelyan, *John Bright*; various biographies; and the present writer's *England since Waterloo*, ch. ix.

crisis : prices were high, wages low, employment scanty and fitful. Heartrending were the reports as to the sufferings of the poor which came from the manufacturing towns : Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham, Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Stockport, and many others. The Chartists prescribed political reform ; Peel believed that the seat of the disease was economic, and that the only effective remedy was tariff-reform. That remedy he applied. The primary purpose of Peel's finance was to cheapen the cost of living ; his second to provide the manufacturers with cheap raw materials ; a third to remove the restrictions on exported manufactures. By the Budgets of 1842, 1845, and 1846 these purposes were largely attained ; the export duties were abolished, while of imported articles 430 were taken out of the tariff altogether, and on 750 the duty was largely reduced. The failure of the English harvest in 1845 and the prevalence of potato disease in Ireland suggested an even bolder measure, and in 1846 Peel carried his proposal for the virtual extinction of the duty on imported wheat.

What were the effects of Peel's fiscal reforms upon agriculture ?

The immediate effect was, unquestionably, to give a sharp set-back to the gradual recovery which had been observable since the beginning of the new reign. This relapse was due partly to panic induced by Peel's legislation, but partly also to poor harvests, to the prevalence of potato disease, and, above all, to the serious losses incurred by the collapse of the speculative edifice reared by the railway "mania."

The set-back was, however, transitory. Prices soon rallied. In 1849 the average price of wheat had fallen to 44s. 3d., in 1850 to 40s. 3d., and in 1851 to 38s. 6d. But by 1853 it was up again to

53s. 3d., and in 1855 it averaged 74s. 8d. Not until 1884 did it ever again fall below 40s., and as a rule it was nearer 50s.

The period between 1852 and 1875 is indeed frequently regarded as the "golden age of English agriculture." To the causes of improvement already enumerated<sup>1</sup> one or two others must be added. Among these, not the least important were the development of the means of internal transport by the multiplication of railroads and a long series of remarkably good harvests. The currency factor also entered once again into the agricultural problem. The discovery of gold-mines in Australia and California in the 'fifties caused a considerable depreciation in the value of money. This, in turn, reacted upon prices and diffused a general sense of prosperity among producers.

Nor had free imports, down to this time, done anything to counteract these favourable conditions. On the contrary, farmers had derived material benefit from the cheapening of imported agricultural accessories—implements, cake, artificial manures, and so forth; while foreign competition had hardly affected, as yet, the price of home-grown wheat and other products. To this result a series of wars materially contributed—the Crimean War, the Civil War in America, and the Franco-German War.

Thus, for a quarter of a century after the repeal of the Corn Laws, agriculture continued to flourish. The prevailing prosperity made itself manifest in many directions. Landlords obtained enhanced rents and spent a large proportion of them in the permanent improvement of their estates; farmers made large profits and attained a standard of comfort, not to say of luxury, such as they had

<sup>1</sup> *Supra*, pp. 121-2.

rarely, if ever, enjoyed before. The capital value of land, live-stock, and crops increased by no less a sum than £445,000,000, and in the last twelve years of prosperity (1867-78) the acreage under cultivation was extended by nearly 2,000,000 acres.<sup>1</sup>

Every indication seemed to promise a prolonged period of prosperity. There was, it is true, a short interval of unhealthy inflation between 1870 and 1873, followed by the inevitable recoil, but no contemporary observer could well have doubted that the whole agricultural edifice rested upon a sound and substantial basis.

The day of adversity was, however, at hand.

### § 3. AGRICULTURAL DEPRESSION, 1879-1901

The year 1877 was the last during which English farmers had the satisfaction of selling their wheat at an average price of over 50s. a quarter. It was also remarkable for the last visitation of the cattle-plague (*rinderpest*). Some twelve years before (1865-6) there had been a similar but even severer visitation. The scourge broke out in London at midsummer 1865, and rapidly spread into the provinces. By the middle of October twenty-one counties in England were affected, two in Wales, and sixteen in Scotland. Before Parliament met in February 1866, 120,000 cases, of which 90,000 had proved fatal, were reported. The Executive dealt in half-hearted fashion with the outbreak, and permitted the disease to get a hold of the country; but the onslaught was partial. Ireland was wholly exempt; Wales almost entirely; the dairy farmers in Cheshire and the north-western counties suffered the most severely. The total losses were estimated at £3,500,000, but in the long run

Curtler, *Short History of Agriculture*, pp. 287, 288.

the visitation had some salutary effects: sanitary regulations were more generally enforced in dairies and byres, and cattle were placed under more effective supervision. Notwithstanding these precautions, however, there was a recurrence of the disease in 1877, and the losses then incurred by the farmers contributed one element to the deepening gloom.

Before long there were many others. Of several black years the year 1879 was the blackest in recent agricultural history. An abnormal rainfall combined with the continuous absence of sun to bring a grievous murrain upon the sheep and cattle. Liver-rot decimated the flocks, while foot-and-mouth disease and pleuropneumonia were hardly less fatal among the herds. The losses of the farmers are said to have amounted, in the years 1879-81, to over £10,000,000 sterling from sheep-rot alone. Harvests, too, fell lamentably short of the average. Between 1874 and 1882 only two good crops were gathered in; and when, in the 'nineties, the crops improved, the rapid fall in prices rendered it unremunerative to harvest them. Nor were the seasons even then too kindly. If there was too much rain and too little sun in the decade 1876-86, there was too much sun and too little rain in the 'nineties. Between 1892 and 1900 there were several years of serious drought, that of 1893 being the most severe within living memory.

This accumulation of misfortunes naturally aroused the attention of the Legislature. It is a highly significant fact that between 1846 and 1879 there was not a single Parliamentary inquiry into the condition of agriculture. In the last twenty years of the century it was otherwise. Two Royal Commissions were charged, during that

period, to investigate the causes of the prevailing depression. The first, generally known by the name of its chairman, the Duke of Richmond, reported in 1882; the second sat under the chairmanship of Lord Eversley from 1893 to 1897. The several Reports issued by these Commissions throw a lurid light upon the rapid deterioration in the conditions of English farming. The Richmond Commission bore witness to "the great extent and intensity of the distress, which has fallen upon the agricultural community." It should be noted, however, that the depression, though severe, was unequally distributed. It was greatest in the South and the Eastern Midlands—in fact, in the great wheat area—and least in the north-west, in the extreme south-west, and in Kent. The depression was attributed to a combination of causes:—a succession of miserable seasons; the stress of foreign competition; the incidence of local taxation; the inequality and unfairness of railway rates; the prevalence of disease among flocks and herds; the burden of tithe; the inadequacy of agricultural education; high rents, and obsolete land laws. Many of the grievances thus disclosed were of long standing, but one factor was new, and its appearance had accentuated the pressure of the rest. The new factor was foreign competition.

Down to the French Revolution England had been actually an exporter of wheat. Even down to 1850 the imports had been inconsiderable, such wheat as was imported coming mainly<sup>1</sup> from European countries. But between 1860 and 1880 the production of wheat in the United States was trebled, and after the opening of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1886) Canadian wheat began to come in increasing quantity into the European

<sup>1</sup> Nearly 80 per cent, of the whole,



markets. Thus in 1851-5 the average imports of wheat were only 14,000,000 cwts.; in 1881-5 they rose to 58,000,000 cwts., and in 1901-5 to 87,000,000 cwts. The unfamiliar combination of short crops and low prices hit the English farmer very heavily, and he retaliated upon fortune, naturally but disastrously, by letting down the land. In other countries depression was encountered and to some extent counteracted by higher farming; in England, under conditions even more discouraging, it was met by relaxation of effort and the starvation of the land. The Legislature was not inattentive to the woes of agriculture. The Ground Game Act was passed in 1880 to protect crops from the depredations of hares and rabbits; increased security of tenure and compensation for improvements was given to tenant farmers by the Agricultural Holdings Acts of 1875 and 1883<sup>1</sup>; grants in aid of local taxation were made from the Imperial Exchequer; a free market in land was promoted by Lord Cairns's Settled Land Act of 1881; Acts were passed for the prevention of cattle disease; a separate Department of Agriculture—under a parliamentary Minister—was set up in 1889; the new County Councils were encouraged, by the allocation of the "whisky money" in 1890, to spend money on technical education in agriculture; the burden of tithe was readjusted, and remissions—if not reductions—of rent were on all sides granted by landowners to their tenants. The remissions amounted by 1890 to not less, on the average, than 30 per cent., while in the wheat-growing districts they frequently reached 75 per cent.

But, in spite of all that was done to assist agriculture, things went from bad to worse, and the successive Reports of Lord Eversley's Com-

<sup>1</sup> Further extended by Acts of 1900 and 1906.

mission testified to the almost complete demoralisation of the greatest of our industries. The pressure of foreign competition had, since 1880, grown steadily greater; the United States and India both garnered magnificent harvests in 1891; and in 1894 English wheat touched its bottom price, 17s. 6d. per quarter, averaging for the year only 22s. 10d. Under these circumstances it is not wonderful that the wheat area should have contracted to 1,456,042 acres—the smallest on record. Currency commotions were again affecting the fortunes of agriculture. Ever since 1873 the price of silver—then for the first time demonetised in Germany and no longer exchangeable for gold in Paris at a fixed ratio—had been steadily falling. This depreciation of silver meant a premium on the export of wheat from those countries which still maintained a silver standard. When, for example, the Russian rouble and the Indian rupee fell in value to something not much above 1s., the English sovereign would purchase in those countries nearly twice as much wheat as it had formerly done. The significance of this factor in reducing the price of English-grown wheat has not, as a rule, been sufficiently appreciated.<sup>1</sup> It was not, however, wheat only which had to face foreign competition. Maize, meat, poultry, eggs, butter, cheese, fruit, and vegetables, all began to pour into the English markets from abroad: to the great advantage of the English consumer, but to the alarm and confusion of the home producer.

This was legitimate competition, assuming the soundness of the policy of free imports. But the English farmer had to confront conditions which imposed on him a handicap altogether unfair.

<sup>1</sup> Similarly and conversely the recent depreciation of gold has sensibly eased the agricultural situation,

Such, for example, was the "gambling in futures" which became at this time a common practice among American merchants. Equally disturbing to legitimate trade was the sale of articles under false descriptions, such as margarine for butter, cheese made from skim milk with animal fat, and imported beef and mutton purporting to be "prime English." Against the latter practices legislation could protect the British producer, and to some extent has been effective in doing so; against the former and more subtle danger it could not.

In all these respects things had gone from bad to worse in the interval between the Richmond and the Eversley Commissions. In the two decades after 1875 the capital value of agricultural land in the United Kingdom fell by nearly 50 per cent.<sup>1</sup>; farmers' capital was estimated to have decreased by about 40 per cent., and the small occupying owners, such as those in the Isle of Axholme, suffered even more severely than the tenant farmers. The latter got large remissions, if not actual reductions, of rent from their landlords; the former could get little sympathy or assistance from the mortgagees to whom in more prosperous days they had mortgaged their little properties in order to effect further purchases or even to provide additional working capital.

The steady rise in the rate of agricultural wages, combined with decreased efficiency, was another factor which, however desirable in itself, added complexity to the problem confronting the English farmer.<sup>2</sup>

Some relief was given by the Agricultural

<sup>1</sup> The Final Report of the Eversley Commission, § 73, put the decline at £834,000,000; but for criticism of these figures, see Dr. Edwin Cannan, ap. *Economic Review*, viii. 109.

<sup>2</sup> From 13s. 0½d. in 1871-5 to 14s. 2½d. in 1896-1900, and to 15s. 0½d. in 1906-8. These figures are for England and Wales.

Rates Act of 1896, which remitted 50 per cent. of the rates on agricultural land, and so did something to reduce the gross injustice of local taxation. A series of Agricultural Holdings Acts gave increased security to improving tenants; the Acts of 1893 and 1899 protected farmers against adulteration; that of 1896 against the importation of infected animals; while the Improvement of Land Act (1899) gave increased facilities for borrowing to improving but impoverished landlords. Nevertheless, English agriculture continued down to the close of the century in a sorry plight.

In the last ten or fifteen years there has been a slight but perceptible improvement. Prices show some recovery from the deep depression of the middle 'nineties<sup>1</sup>; wages have risen; farmers have adapted themselves to new conditions; and, above all, technical education in agriculture has made advances which may fairly be described as astonishing. The improvement is not easily measurable by statistics, but, in order to appreciate it, we need go no farther than to two books separated from each other by a decade: Sir H. Rider Haggard's *Rural England* and Mr. A. D. Hall's *A Pilgrimage of British Farming*. Both books are conspicuous for literary charm; each is the work of a man deeply versed in the art as well as the science of agriculture; each can be relied upon for accuracy in observation and detachment and impartiality in criticism. But the note sounded by Mr. Hall is distinctly more hopeful than that of Sir. H. Rider Haggard. Again and again, as we follow the track of Mr. Hall's *Pilgrimage*, we come across such comments as these: "things in this district are

<sup>1</sup> Wheat averaged 34s. 9d. in 1912 as against 22s. 10d. in 1894, having been up to 36s. 11d. for 1909.

'quietly prosperous'; "the farming here is of a 'very sound and conservative type'; "little land coming into the open market"; "land in demand." Even of Essex, not long ago regarded as derelict, we read: "Essex farmers are in a thriving condition again"; "no longer the derelict Essex—the countryside seemed to smile with a quiet, unexcited prosperity"; "competition for vacant farms." Then just as things were beginning to look distinctly more hopeful, we have another set-back, and in the world of agriculture to-day all is uncertainty and perturbation.

The cause of this last reaction is not economic, but political. The last thing to be desired is the obtrusion of party politics into a scientific discussion of agrarian problems. But no critic, however detached, can ignore the fact that the prevailing confusion dates from the acceptance of the land-taxation clauses of the Finance Act of 1909-10. It was less the proposals themselves, repugnant as they are to every accepted canon of taxation, than the spirit of resentment against a particular class revealed in the discussion of the new fiscal principles. The inspiring motive was too palpably revenge rather than revenue. From the latter point of view the results have, indeed, so far, been purely negative; nor does it seem likely that they can ever be otherwise. But though unfruitful in revenue, the new land taxes have already reacted disastrously upon the agrarian economy. The landlords received a clear warning that the claims advanced by them were in certain quarters regarded as incompatible with the interests of the community. Who can blame them if they have made haste to divest themselves of property, for the mere possession of which they are held up to public execration? Nor does land-ownership any longer confer

political influence upon the possessor. The centre of political gravity has indeed shifted—not once, but twice.

The successive shiftings have, naturally, been reflected in legislation. Concern for the interests of the tenant farmer, enfranchised by the Acts of 1832 and 1867, was revealed by such Acts as the Agricultural Holdings Acts of 1875, 1883, 1900, and 1906; the Contagious Diseases (Animals) Act of 1878; the Ground Game Act of 1880.

Then came, in 1884, the political enfranchisement of the agricultural labourer. Joseph Arch had already attempted to improve his economic conditions by the organisation of the Agricultural Labourers' Union in 1872. During the period of agricultural prosperity the new union was successful in getting some share of it for the labourer. But, in face of deepening depression, the organisation could not be maintained, and in the early 'nineties it altogether collapsed. By that time, however, the agricultural labourer had been "discovered" by the urban politicians, and the result may be seen in the increasing solicitude in regard to small holdings, allotments, wages, rural housing, and so forth.

On many of these questions there is substantial agreement among the reasonable men of all parties, and considerable progress has already been made towards a solution. Meanwhile, more extreme party men saw the possibility of gaining an electoral advantage by flinging the "land question," as a whole, into the party arena. That this question arouses the bitterest passions among certain sections of the population is undeniable; but it is noticeable that the feeling is most bitter where the ignorance is most profound—among the urban artisans. For their consumption no fables can be too extravagant; no pictures, of

tyranny on the one side and suffering on the other, too highly coloured.

The first stage in the evolution of the new policy was registered by the Budget of 1909; the second has been initiated by the "Land Campaign" formally opened in 1913. That campaign, whether it leads to party victory or defeat, must needs reopen the whole agrarian problem. Whether we like it or not, we shall have to undertake a new investigation into the condition of English agriculture; to scrutinise afresh the characteristic features of the English land system; to appraise its economic, social, and political results; and to reconsider the mutual relations of the owners, occupiers, and tillers of the soil.

That the patient who now waits in the ante-chamber of the nation's surgery is perfectly "fit," hardly the most sanguine optimist would venture to affirm; whether his disorders are grave or trifling, organic or functional, is a matter of bitter controversy, if not among the specialists, at any rate among the amateur apothecaries who delight in the discussion of morbid symptoms and pharmaceutical remedies.

His best friends may be inclined to regret that, after a long period of debility, his symptoms should be made the subject of exacerbated discussion just at the moment when he is exhibiting unmistakable signs of renewed health. But the fact is that his case is too interesting to be allowed the luxury of an unsensational recovery. He will be lucky if he escapes the surgeon's knife; but under no circumstances must he be permitted to recover until the physicians have had an opportunity of prescribing.

Some of the prescriptions will be analysed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE LAND PROBLEM OF TO-DAY—SOME SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

"Alike by its economic, its social, and its moral effect, the neglect of agriculture, the loss of a 'land tradition,' has exercised a depressing effect on our national life and is to a great extent responsible for the confusion of thought and waste of effort, the lack of clear and simple ideals, which clogs the efforts of social reformers."

VISCOUNT MILNER,

ap. TURNOR, *Land Problems and National Welfare*, p. vi.

#### § 1. LAND NATIONALISATION

THE most drastic solution of the land problem is that put forward by the Socialists. They will be satisfied with nothing short of the nationalisation of the land, as of all the instruments required for the production, exchange, and distribution of commodities. According to their view, no other means will avail to stop at their source the mischiefs arising from modern methods of wealth production and to secure for the community the increment of "socially created" wealth.

The word "nationalisation" is a resounding one; it has done duty on thousands of platforms in Hyde Park and elsewhere, and it may be well, therefore, to come to close quarters with the policy for which it stands.

Those who favour this prescription desire to abolish all individual *ownership* in the soil, and to



make the State or community the universal landlord. The desired end might be attained in any one of three ways. The State might impose a tax of twenty shillings in the pound on all landed property, and so induce the present owners to surrender a worthless commodity; or it might, in one way or another, buy out the landlords at a fair price; or it might simply appropriate the land without compensation, or, as some have been taught to say, "resume a possession of which it has never legally divested itself."

The first method, if not actually devised, was first recommended to the popular imagination by an American writer, Mr. Henry George. In the year 1879 Mr. George published a work, *Progress and Poverty*, which made a profound, and seemingly a permanent, impression. Passionate in its appeal and rhetorical in its language, the argument of the book was simple and direct. Wealth increases with unprecedented rapidity, but the share obtained by the manual labourer diminishes. This phenomenon is profoundly disquieting; the more so since the explanation usually offered—the Malthusian theory—is demonstrably false. Population increases fast, but the means of subsistence increase even faster. How, then, can we explain the prevalence of poverty amid "plethoric plenty"? The only complete and adequate explanation is to be found in the fact that land has been appropriated by individuals, and that its ever-rising increment passes automatically into their pockets. There is but one way to remove this evil: "We must make land common property." "Poverty deepens as wealth increases, and wages are forced down while productive power grows, because land, which is the source of all wealth and the field of all labour, is monopolised. To extirpate poverty, to make

wages (what justice commands they should be) the full earnings of the labourer, we must, therefore, substitute for the individual ownership of land a common ownership. Nothing else will go to the cause of the evil—in nothing else is there the slightest hope.”<sup>1</sup>

It has seemed desirable to quote the *ipsissima verba* of the prophet, since some of his latter-day disciples refuse to admit that Henry George's views—now appropriated and diffused by the single-taxers—may be identified with those of the State Socialist and the land-nationaliser. If it be an error to do so, the error is shared by such men as Henry Fawcett and Arnold Toynbee. But let Henry George speak for himself. “It is,” he writes, “a very easy thing to thus sweep away all private ownership of land and convert all occupiers into tenants of the State by appropriating rent. No complicated laws or cumbersome machinery is necessary. It is only necessary to tax land up to its full value. Do that, and without any infringement of the just rights of property [*sic*] the land would become virtually the people's. What under this system was paid as rent by the tenant would be taken by the State. . . . The way to make land common property is simply to take rent for the common benefit; and to do this the easy way is to abolish one tax after another, until the whole weight of taxation falls upon the value of land. When that point is reached the battle is won. The hare is caught, killed, and skinned, to cook him will be a very easy matter.”<sup>2</sup> How, in the face of a declaration so specific, it is possible to maintain that George's views “were for the most part diametrically opposed to State

<sup>1</sup> *Progress and Poverty*, p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> *Land and People*, by Henry George, pp. 14, 15 (published by “Land Values” Publication Department).

Socialism,"<sup>1</sup> and that the views of the single-taxer must be distinguished from those of the nationaliser, it is not easy to understand. The question is far from being merely academic. Mr. Henry George is the apostle of an active political party. The pamphlet from which I quote is published by the "Land Values" Publication Department. A recent report (1911-12) of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values records (p. 42) a "meeting, to commemorate the birthday of Henry George," and emphasises the fact that "during the period April, 1911-March, 1912 the [publication] Department has sold 3,878 books by Henry George, 5,320 Henry George pamphlets" (p. 88). A correct apprehension of George's views must, therefore, be deemed to be of some immediate significance, and the above quotations do, I submit, fairly represent them.

It will be urged that Henry George and his disciples propose to confiscate only the *economic* rent by means of taxation, leaving the landlord in undisputed possession of the improvements effected by him or his predecessors in title. This may be regarded as a sign of grace and accepted as a concession to justice. But is it a concession which, in a fiscal sense, the single-taxer can afford to make? The tax on land values is, we must remember, not to supplement, but to supersede all other modes of taxation—imperial and local alike. Much more than that. It will get rid of pauperism and even of poverty; it will provide the only effectual remedy for unemployment; it will avert commercial crises and restore

<sup>1</sup> Thus one critic writes: "So far from Henry George developing the germ of Socialism in its present sense, or for that matter in any other, he was opposed to the nationalisation of the land." Mr. Fawcett, on the contrary, heads a paragraph, "Nationalisation of the land, as advocated by Mr. Wallace and Mr. George" (*Political Economy*, Bk. II. c. xi. pp. 288, 289, ed. 1907).

to trade that stability to which it has long been a stranger. In short, it will inaugurate a social and economic millennium. But leaving on one side all the remoter and more rhetorical consequences, we may ask the Georgian enthusiast to put down in figures the *maximum* sum which he can imaginably obtain from a tax of 20s. in the £ on land values. The demands of the Exchequer—central and local—amount to-day to more than £360,000,000 a year. Nor are those demands likely to decrease. A tax of 20s. in the £ on land values—urban and rural, including sporting rents, rents from mines, and various miscellaneous items—could not yield more than £100,000,000 a year; and this would include a large sum which could not be regarded as a tax on *land* values at all, but a tax on the revenue derived from capital actually sunk in permanent improvements. Of the total net rent of agricultural land (£32,000,000) at least 50 per cent., or £16,000,000, is said by competent authorities to represent not rent but interest on capital.<sup>1</sup> But making the single-taxers a present of these improvements, how do they propose to balance the national accounts? The community would have “resumed” possession of “national” property; the landlords would have been “eliminated”; the tenants would, as regards rent, be neither worse off nor better; but the nation would be faced, on the existing basis of expenditure, by a minimum deficit of about £260,000,000 a year.<sup>2</sup>

Such is the solution advocated by the single-tax party.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *supra*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> On this question reference should be made to the Final Report on Local Taxation [Cd. 7315], 1914, which appeared after this book was written. Both the majority and minority Reports condemn and expose the fallacies of a “single tax,” and the majority do not recommend a rate on land values at all (cf. pp. 102–120.)

Another party would "resume" possession for the community by means which are not open to the charge of dishonesty. They also would nationalise the land and eliminate the landlords, but they would proceed by way of purchase, not by way of confiscation.

Against the ethics of their proposal not a word can be said. If the community deems it advisable to buy out the existing owners of the soil, it has clearly a perfect right to do so. But if the ethics of the proposal be unexceptionable, what of the economics? Taking the rental of the United Kingdom at £100,000,000, as before, and putting the purchase price at twenty-five years, the State would have to find a capital sum of £2,500,000,000 to complete the transaction. Even at twenty years' purchase it would mean a quadrupling of the national debt, and in either case such a sum could not be raised in the open market at less than 4 per cent.—if at that. Even if the landlords were willing or were compelled to accept compensation in land stock bearing interest at 4 per cent., it would mean, in the former case, an addition of £100,000,000 a year to the national expenditure; in the latter of £80,000,000. Against this there would be set, we may presume, the rents receivable—and the mention of "rent" brings us to the core of the question.

Let us assume that by one means or another, by confiscatory taxation or by honest purchase, the State has become the owner of the land. How is the State going to deal with its property?

There would seem to be only two alternatives. Either the State must again let out the land to tenants; or it must itself assume the functions of a universal farmer as well as a universal landlord. The thorough-going and consistent Socialist will

undoubtedly prefer the second alternative. If all the means of production, distribution, and exchange are, according to formula, to be vested in the State, there can be no room for private capital, for individual profits, or for any such distinctions as those between tenant farmers and labourers.

In this case, therefore, the State must needs organise an agricultural civil service, with whose assistance the work of production must be carried on. The existing agents and farmers will become, it may be supposed, State-employees in the first division; the labourers will become second-division cultivators, and so on. This is a conceivable arrangement; the State could no doubt organise an agricultural service, just as it now organises a naval service or a dockyard service.

But who would be the gainer? Would the agriculturists themselves welcome and benefit by the change of system? The landlord would have disappeared, and need not be further considered. Would the tenant farmer like to exchange his present position for that of a State-employee—a first-division cultivator? Would the labourer gain by becoming a second-division cultivator? No unequivocal answer is possible: they might, or they might not.

Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that the cultivators—in all divisions—are satisfied with the new position assigned to them. A much more important question remains. Will the change benefit the general body of consumers—the community at large? May we anticipate that the new service will be so well organised, that the new State Department will be administered with such efficiency and economy that the soil will yield more abundantly than at present, and that the community will benefit by getting its

agricultural produce more cheaply? By "more cheaply" must be understood, of course, by less expenditure of labour, since the mere money medium will presumably have disappeared. Cheapness, however, is not the sole criterion of efficiency. From an agricultural system we look for more than meat and bread and raiment. Can we expect that the new organisation will yield better results than the old in a social and political and physical sense? The defects of the existing system are admitted; will they disappear under the new?

It may be objected that the practical socialist proposes nothing so fantastic as the method described above. If the objection be upheld, take the other alternative. The State shall simply step into the place of the existing landlords, and the rest of the agrarian community shall go on as before. Again we must ask: *cui bono*? The tenant farmer will hold his land from, and pay his rent to, a Government office. But what rent? Is the rent to be an economic one, the best competitive rent which the State can obtain in an open market? If so, it is safe to say that the majority of tenant farmers will find themselves paying from 20 to 25 per cent. more rent than they do at present. But assuming that they escape this fate and remain as they are, in what way will they be advantaged? They might possibly gain something in regard to security of tenure. But this benefit (of which more hereafter) might unquestionably be secured without all the apparatus of nationalisation.

It is quite certain that such tenant farmers as favour nationalisation (if any there be) hope to obtain from the process a *reduction* of rents. They expect that the State will accept something less than the price of the land, as determined

by competition in an open market. But should the State be disposed to such a course, two difficulties would necessarily arise: (i) the difference between the economic rent and the actual sum accepted from the tenants would have to be made good by the community at large; and (ii) a body of privileged tenants would be created. On what principles would the privilege be conferred? How would the tenants be selected?

We find ourselves impaled on the horns of a dilemma. If the State, which has, *ex hypothesi*, purchased the land at a fair market price, charges to its tenants a fair market rent, the community at large may escape loss, but the actual cultivators of the soil, whether farmers or labourers, gain nothing. If the State lets its land at something less than the real economic rent, the community suffers, immediately in pocket, and hardly less certainly in *morale*; for corruption is the inevitable consequence of privilege.

We conclude, then, that nationalisation, if attained by confiscatory methods, could not possibly realise the sanguine anticipations of the single-taxers; that it would not even be adequate to the existing fiscal requirements of the State; still less inaugurate a political and social millennium. If, on the other hand, nationalisation were attained by means to which no exception could be taken on the score of public morality, it must needs put a terrible strain upon public credit, and might involve the State in irreparable economic disaster. In neither case would the process necessarily bring any advantage to the actual cultivators of the soil, or remedy any of the admitted defects of the existing system.

Not in this direction, therefore, may the solution of the land-problem be found.



## § 2. THE LAND-CAMPAIGNERS

Let us next examine the proposals recently put forward on behalf of the Radical party by Mr. Lloyd George.

We need not make too much of the cynical admission of their author that those proposals were devised with a view to electoral exigencies. They may be good or bad, whether they gain votes for the Liberal party or lose them, and, in any case, it is proper that they should be examined on their merits.

It will be observed that those proposals contain—so far as they have been formulated—nothing to encourage either single-taxers or nationalisers.<sup>1</sup> The State is not prepared to confiscate immediately the whole of the landlord's interests in the soil, still less to purchase them. The landlord is not to be eliminated. On the contrary, he is to be carefully preserved, not indeed for use—since his functions will be transferred in great measure to a judicial commission—still less for ornament, but simply as a target to be shot at. The dread which seems to haunt the mind of the orthodox Radical land-reformer is lest the landlord should decline this new and honourable function, and should induce an unsuspecting tenantry to relieve him of his responsibilities by premature purchase in the open market.

Then as to the farmers. To the sitting tenants three boons are promised by the Liberal campaigners: freedom from the ravages of game, a fair rent determined by a judicial tribunal, and greater security of tenure. "Theoretically, the ordinary security of the tenant is imperfect. Practically, it already is, with some slight amend-

<sup>1</sup> These words should perhaps be modified in view of Mr. Lloyd George's recent speech at Glasgow in February 1914.

ments, complete."<sup>1</sup> Such is the considered verdict of the body of experts best qualified to express an opinion on such a matter. But to this virtual security of tenure there is admittedly one serious exception.<sup>2</sup> If a landlord desires or is compelled to sell his estate, the position of the tenant is immediately jeopardised. In many cases the best thing that can happen is that the tenant should purchase his holding. But if he does, he stands to be unfairly penalised for good farming. Well-farmed land naturally fetches a better price than land which has been "let down," and it is contrary to every rule of justice that a tenant purchasing at public auction should be actually compelled to pay dearly for his own enterprise and skill. It is true that under the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1908 a tenant is entitled to compensation for "unreasonable disturbance," but the law has decided that "a notice to quit for the purpose of a sale is not an unreasonable disturbance, and, therefore, that the tenant is not entitled to the special compensation for loss or expense on sale or removal of stock, implements, produce, or household goods,"<sup>3</sup> which the Act of 1908 provides.

Every fair-minded person will agree that here we have a clear case for the amendment of the law. A new situation has undeniably been created by the break-up of estates, and a new remedy must be devised. Probably an extension of the provisions of the Act of 1908 would effectively avert any real hardship, or it might be well to insist that, in the case of an intended sale, the tenant should be entitled to two years' notice to quit.

<sup>1</sup> *The Land Problem*. Notes suggested by the Report of the Land Inquiry Committee, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *supra*, chap. i. pp. 6, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Land Problem*, p. 25.

Neither of these remedies is, however, sufficiently heroic for the Radical campaigners. The pivot of their scheme, so far as the tenant farmer is concerned, is the erection of a Land Court or Commission. This Commission is not to be a "Court,"<sup>1</sup> although, as Mr. Asquith explained, it "will be judicial both in its character and in its methods," and will exercise its functions "in complete independence of the Executive."<sup>2</sup> It is to consist apparently of a central Ministry of Lands, assisted by itinerant Commissioners who are to have the "means of seeing for themselves what is going on."<sup>3</sup> Powers of extraordinary range and complexity are to be vested in this Commission. It is to have power, for instance, to fix the price to be paid by local bodies not only for land actually required "for various schemes, such as street widening, schools, parks, town extension, and a hundred other objects," but "in advance of their immediate requirements"<sup>4</sup>—in plain words, for speculative purposes. It is to have power to acquire at a "reasonable price all waste, derelict, neglected tracts of land," and "to take such steps as may be necessary to afforest, to reclaim, to drain, to level, to clear, to improve, and to equip these reclaimed lands with a view to cultivating them up to the limit of their possibilities."<sup>5</sup> It is also to be armed with tyrannous and unprecedented powers for the "revision" of contracts between urban tenants and their landlords. But leaving these high matters on one side, let us see how it will affect the rural landowner and the tenant farmer. If land is required for small holdings,

<sup>1</sup> "Not courts. There again we are going to keep the lawyer outside" (Mr. Lloyd George at *Swindon*, October 18, 1913, Authorised Edition, p. 9).

<sup>2</sup> Speech at National Liberal Club, December 9, 1913.

<sup>3</sup> *Swindon* speech, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Asquith.

<sup>5</sup> *Swindon*,

it is the Land Commission which will fix the price; if a landlord proposes to raise rents, the tenant may appeal to the Commission—"of course, at his own risk" (Mr. Asquith); if the tenant can show that enhanced wages are increasing his working expenses, or if he can show a "general and persistent change of an adverse kind in agricultural conditions,"<sup>1</sup> to the Commission he can go for a reduction of rent. The same kindly Providence will give the tenant "something in the nature of exemplary compensation and damages" in the case of "capricious eviction," or if they (the Commissioners) think "the eviction is purely wanton," they may treat the notice to quit as "null and of no effect."<sup>2</sup> If the landlord wishes to sell, he must compensate his tenants, and the Commissioners will decide the amount payable, not only for actual improvements, but for "goodwill." It is to be observed that as regards rents, a distinction is to be drawn between "small" farmers and "large." The former, it would seem, may appeal against existing rents; the latter only against an increase of rent or against a diminution of profit either due to enhanced wages or to a decline in agriculture.

Is it, then, suggested that English landlords as a class are tyrants and extortioners? Mr. Asquith, at any rate, entertains no illusions on this point: "Nor do we think that the evidence shows—I certainly am not so satisfied myself—that English farmers as a whole are over-rented. On the contrary, there is no doubt that a considerable fraction of them, at any rate, are paying less than the economic rent which would be paid if their holdings were put up and competed for

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Asquith, *op. cit.*, December 9, 1913.

<sup>2</sup> Swindon.

in the open market." If, then, the farmer is to bring his case before the Commissioners "at his own risk," is there not a considerable risk—assuming both competence and impartiality on the part of the tribunal—that rents will be substantially raised? Practical agriculturists answer this question with a decided affirmative: "A rise in rent is a risk which many tenant farmers will have to face."<sup>1</sup> That is the opinion also of Lord Eversley, who sat in Mr. Gladstone's Cabinets and gave to his Irish policy consistent and enthusiastic support. "If a Land Court were established," he writes, "it is probable that rents would be raised rather than lowered. A judicial rent would be a very different affair to existing rents."<sup>2</sup>

This might be awkward for the farmer, but to the setting-up of a judicial tribunal there are objections much more fundamental.

The first is that it would deal a blow at the principle of sanctity of contract, which would shake to its foundation not the land system only, but the whole industrial and commercial and financial system of the country. The light-hearted and short-sighted land-campaigners appear to imagine that they can play with land and landlords without imperilling other interests for which they have more regard. Let them not be deceived. The socialist lions may be satisfied for the moment by a meal at the expense of the landlords. Such nutriment will not permanently assuage their appetites.

These, however, are remoter consequences. The immediate effect of the establishment of a "Court" or Commission would be to revolutionise the existing conditions of English land-

<sup>1</sup> *Land Problem*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Times*, October 2, 1913.

tenure. And that in two directions. The landlord who is at present the friend, the adviser, and the banker of his tenants would cease to be any one of these, and would become a mere rent-charger. The tenant, on his side, would "cease to be the figurehead on his farm; his place would be taken by the Land Court officials, for whom he would be only the bailiff. Instead of being in the fields among his men, he would become a clerk whose time for many hours in the day was occupied in making voluminous and intricate returns."<sup>1</sup>

A third objection remains. A Land Commission could not fail to lead to the establishment of dual ownership--of all forms of tenure admittedly the least satisfactory. Mr. Asquith disclaims the intention. "We do not propose," he said, "to set up the Irish system, under which, through the operation of Land Courts and the recognition of what used to be called the three F's, the occupier becomes in effect the joint owner of the soil. That is not a system, whatever may be the case elsewhere, adapted either to the genius of the English people or to the conditions of English rural life." The sentiment is admirable, and no one doubts Mr. Asquith's good faith; but what is the value of his intentions weighed against the inexorable logic of agricultural facts? His Commissioners are to fix a fair rent and to guarantee fixity of tenure. Granting these, can you deny free sale? That it is denied under the Act of 1911 to the small-holders of Scotland proves nothing. The experience has been too short. In the absence of it, Lord Eversley's logic seems to be worth more than Mr. Asquith's good intentions. "Fixity of tenure," writes the former, "is the inevitable result of the

<sup>1</sup> *Land Problem*, p. 28.

constitution of a Land Court and the judicial determination of rent. This was insisted upon and admitted in the discussion of the Irish measure of 1881. It was conceded that the three F's, as they were called—Fair Rents, Fixity of Tenure, Free Sale—were inseparably connected; that a judicial rent involved a term of years for which the decision would run, at the end of which there would be an even stronger claim for renewal of the term, and so on, *ad infinitum*; and that, having legalised such an interest, it would be difficult to refuse the right of assigning and bequeathing it.”<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible for anyone who is familiar with the history of the land problem in Ireland to question the accuracy of Lord Eversley's prognostication. The adoption of two F's must lead to the recognition of the third—the right of free sale. But this means dual ownership. We seem, then, to be within measurable distance of repeating the blunder which, against the advice of some of the most enlightened Irish Liberals of that day, Mr. Gladstone committed in 1881. Mr. Gladstone, indeed, was not without excuse. The condition of Ireland at the time was well-nigh desperate; the Land League defied the law of the land; life and property were hopelessly insecure. Moreover, Mr. Gladstone could plead that he was but giving legal sanction to a custom recognised by all reasonable landlords, and depriving of legal excuse only those who desired to violate justice.

None of these excuses are available for Mr. Asquith and his colleagues. The economic conditions, the historical traditions, the agricultural customs of England are entirely at variance with those of Ireland. But even if they were identical,

<sup>1</sup> *Times*, October 2, 1913.

is there any reason why England should repeat a blunder, from the consequences of which the wise legislation of Lord Ashbourne and Mr. George Wyndham—admirably seconded by the devoted labours of Sir Horace Plunkett—have been gradually extricating Ireland during the last twenty-nine years?

From the evils of dual ownership Ireland has been redeemed by a large and generous scheme of State-assisted purchase. The same prescription has been recommended, on high authority, for adoption in England.

To the consideration of this solution of the land problem a few words must be devoted.

### § 3. LAND PURCHASE

No more than the Socialist or the Radical does the Unionist suppose that all is for the best in the best of all possible agricultural worlds. But he approaches the consideration of the problem by a different route and in a different temper. He has no abstract theory to exploit; he has no animus against any particular class; and he has, generally speaking, much more intimate acquaintance with the actual facts. His interest in agriculture and in country life is not a thing of yesterday. He has never ceased to deplore the operation of those social and economic tendencies which have depopulated the countryside, but he is aware that a townward migration is taking place in countries utterly dissimilar from his own in fiscal, economic, political, and social conditions. Australia is the utopia of State Socialism and unrestrained democracy: it is untainted by any breath of feudal tyranny; it is haunted by no aristocratic traditions, and it basks to-day in the sun of a Labour Ministry. Yet Australia is experiencing



the fatal attraction of city life; so are the United States, so is Germany.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere, indeed, has the tendency revealed itself so strikingly as in England; but nowhere else did the industrial revolution begin so soon. The recognition of the fact that the townward migration is not confined to the decadent countries of the old world does not diminish the zeal of the Tory party to devise a remedy for an admitted evil; but it may contribute to a more accurate diagnosis and discourage the adoption of quack remedies. Tories are inspired by similar motives in dealing with rural education, with the housing and wages of agricultural workers, above all with the provision of gardens, allotments, and small holdings.

The question of small holdings brings us, however, to a definite line of cleavage between parties. Both parties believe in multiplying them, and have given proof of their convictions by legislation. But the Radicals are, as we have seen, relentlessly opposed to giving the small cultivator, or indeed any one else, the status of proprietorship. They desire that the actual cultivators of the soil should remain, in perpetuity, the tenants of the State or of some public authority, such as a County Council.

The Tories hold, on the contrary, that no ultimate and satisfactory solution of the problem can be found except in a wide extension of the principle of ownership effected either through the State, or by means of mortgage-debenture associations, agricultural banks, co-operative societies, or other similar agencies. The cynic may be inclined to doubt whether the "problem" is not much more acute in political than in agricultural circles. Mr. A. D. Hall is no cynic, but

<sup>1</sup> See an admirable article by Mr. Harold Cox, *Edinburgh Review*, No. 447, p. 244.

a singularly competent and impartial observer, and he would seem to be of this opinion. "Among farmers themselves," he writes, "there is no land question, no smouldering feeling, nor general current of opinion that calls for a 'policy'; in the main they would rather ask to be let alone."<sup>1</sup> The Haversham Committee reached a similar conclusion:

"The main thing which the farmers desire is to be able to remain on their farms, and it is usually when a farmer is unable to remain as tenant owing to the breaking-up of estates that he desires to become an occupying owner. There is little desire for ownership in itself, and it is only advocated as an alternative to being turned out of his home."<sup>2</sup>

We must not, of course, assume that the farmer is invariably the best judge of the situation as a whole. Nor is his the only opinion or interest to be considered. There are the general interests of the State, social, political, and economic, and there are the individual interests of the peasants who do not wish to live out their lives as mere hired labourers, but would be glad to cultivate land on their own account.

For the latter there are three alternatives: tenancy under an individual landlord, tenancy under a public authority, and assisted purchase. And whatever may be the case with the large farmer, there would seem to be no doubt that for the small-holder the method of purchase is the best. Certainly it is infinitely preferable to that of tenancy under a public authority. Indeed, the system under which, as at present, the small-holder embarks upon the profitless task of buying the land, by annual instalments included in his

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 430.

<sup>2</sup> *Report*, § 60, and see *supra*, p. 10.

rent, not for himself but for the County Council, seems to combine every possible disadvantage. Under the alternative plan of purchase, every year, or every instalment, brings the cultivator nearer to the goal of complete and unfettered ownership.

Yet the fact remains that the proportion of applicants for small-holdings who desire to purchase is almost infinitesimal.<sup>1</sup> Mr. E. J. Cheney's *Report* for 1913 on the Small Holdings Act shows that up to December 1912, 154,977 acres had been acquired or agreed to be acquired by County Councils in England and Wales. Of this land 124,709 acres had been let to 8,950 small-holders and only 212 acres had been sold to 20 purchasers. In addition to these, nearly 3,000 applicants had been provided with 37,000 acres by direct negotiation with private landowners, and 6,094 acres had been let to small-holdings associations. In all, the Act has, in five years, provided for over 15,000 applicants.

It is both remarkable and deplorable that so small a proportion of them should have entered upon the road which leads to unfettered ownership. For the advantages of the latter seem obvious and immediate. The purchaser "cannot receive a notice to quit; he cannot have the rent raised on his improvements; every turn of his spade brings him nearer to uncharged ownership. If he stays on the land it grows more valuable to him every year—to him, not to the County Council. He can sell the land if he likes, and the measure of its value to him is the number of instalments which he has paid. He can leave it

<sup>1</sup> The comparatively small number of applications for purchase may very likely be due to the unfavourable terms which are at present offered. It may, therefore, be argued that the purchase policy, in regard to small-holdings, has not, as yet, had a fair chance.

by will, or exercise any other right of ownership, except that of mortgaging. It is his insurance, his savings bank, his burial fund, his provision for his wife and family, his annual investment at compound interest."<sup>1</sup> The argument for purchase could not be more tersely put, and no one has a better right to put it than the authority from whom the above words are quoted.

It may be said, and has been said, that the Small Holdings Act has been "unsympathetically" administered, and that, in consequence, the progress made in the provision of small-holdings has been lamentably slow. No one except a politician in a hurry would wish to go fast. On this point the Report of the Small Holdings Commissioners is entitled to the highest consideration, and their opinion is conclusive: "We do not think that it is altogether a disadvantage at the commencement of the movement that progress should be somewhat deliberate. It is most important that mistakes should not be made at its inception, that the system should be established on a strictly economic basis, and that the work should be accomplished with the goodwill and co-operation of all classes connected with the land. Too great haste will inevitably bring disaster." Nevertheless, very considerable progress has, as we have seen, been made.

That the County Councils, composed for the most part of men who are intimately acquainted with agriculture, should be less sanguine as to the universal applicability of a particular panacea than theorists and poets and politicians is natural, and that their enthusiasm for the Act is tempered by practical experience is undeniably true. Nevertheless, so impartial an observer as Mr. A. D. Hall bears remarkable testimony to "the loyal way"

<sup>1</sup> *Land Problem*, p. 32.

in which the Small Holdings Act has been carried out by County Councils.<sup>1</sup>

Nobody who possesses both sense and experience believes that small-holdings can provide a panacea for all the ills—social, economic, and political—of the rural economy. On the other hand, nobody denies that, given favourable conditions, they may and do produce admirable results. But the conditions must be favourable; the soil must be suitable; the locality must be suitable; above all, the men must be suitable. Accessibility to markets, inexpensive means of transit, facilities for credit, business organisation for the purchase of agricultural necessities and for the sale of products—all these things and many more are essential to the success of the experiment. Where they exist or can be provided, well and good; but it is sheer inhumanity to preach “small-holdings” as a panacea and to hold out hopes which cannot be fulfilled. “To deceive,” as Mr. Lloyd George has well said, “is always a pretty contemptible device, but to deceive the poor is the meanest device of all.” The best friends of agriculture are at one with the hard teachings of experience in warning us that the policy of small-holdings, if indiscriminately adopted, can result only in acute distress and cruel disillusionment.

Nor is it only the individual that must be considered. There is the national aspect of the question. That the well-directed, highly expert, intensive cultivation of the small-holder may induce the soil to yield more abundantly is undeniable. But only in certain crops. For the essential home-grown food-products—for meat and bread—we must still look to the large holder.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> On this point cf. the most suggestive remarks of Messrs. Grisewood and Robins in *Land and the Politicians*, chaps. v. and vi. This

*La petite culture* may extract a higher average yield per acre from certain soils suitable for the production of fruit, vegetables, and such like, but in the production of wheat and the rearing and fattening of live-stock the typical English farmer, renting a large farm under a good landlord, will not suffer by comparison with any in the world.

What is most to be desired is not the hasty and wholesale abandonment of the present system for any other, but opportunity for the trial of new experiments. We want not uniformity, but variety both of tenure and cultivation; not the indiscriminate break-up of large estates or large farms, but room for the small owner and the small cultivator alongside the bigger men. And we want it in the interests of the State, of the individual cultivator, and of the population as a whole.

If, however, it has seemed necessary to sound a note of warning in regard to the multiplication of small owners and small cultivators, it is not less necessary in regard to the whole policy of land purchase.

In cases where an owner has determined upon the break-up of an estate, it may be unavoidable that the State should intervene and advance to the tenants the whole of the purchase-money by means of a reducible mortgage. But it is to be hoped that there will be no attempt to push a policy sound in itself to dangerous extremes. There are many tenants—particularly large tenants—who are better off as they are than ever they could hope to be as owners.

One condition, however, is essential whatever

admirable booklet, only published as my sheets were passing through the press, may be warmly commended to all serious students of the subject. It contains a large number of careful statistical tables and diagrams and much well-digested information. (Duckworth & Co., London.)

the form of tenure or the method of cultivation. Without a sense of security and stability there can be no progress and no improvement in agriculture or in aught else. What English land wants to-day is a steady application of capital, whether that capital is found by a landlord, by a well-secured tenant, by a banker, or by co-operative organisation ; and without security for the investment it will not be forthcoming.

In regard to State-aided purchase on a large scale, one other point deserves attention. Whatever the general merits of the policy, Lord Eversley has made it clear that it cannot be recommended to England on the analogy of Ireland. Apart from other points of contrast in historical tradition, in custom, and in law, there is this fundamental difference between the cases of England and Ireland. In Ireland only a moiety of the ownership has, since 1881, attached to the landlord, and has had to be purchased from him. The advances made by the State to the tenant have been made, therefore, largely on the security of the tenant's own moiety. This security is lacking in the case of English tenants, and the lack of it gravely affects the financial complexion of any purchase scheme which can be devised. Nevertheless, in order to meet certain cases, a scheme must be devised, and for a few years some risks must be taken. If the plan of reducible mortgages—under which the tenant repays the principal by annual instalments—be adopted, the initial risk will not be great, and it will diminish every year. But the State must not go too fast. The politicians must not hurry it. *Festina lente* is a sound maxim of statesmanship, and it is pre-eminently applicable to any scheme for converting, by means of capital procured and advanced by the State, the cultivators of the soil into proprietors.

On social and political grounds such a conversion is eminently desirable. To a less extent it is desirable also on economic grounds, provided that the experiment is confined to suitable cases, and that no attempt is made to attribute to a sound remedy the quality of universal applicability.

For the disorders of the body politic, whether the disorders be constitutional or economic, there is no panacea, and none but a quack will pretend that there is. The problem presented by the tenure and cultivation of land is only one of a sheaf of problems, in part economical, in part ethical, in part social, and in part political. Science and experience are alike teaching us that these problems cannot be studied, still less solved, in isolation. Nothing was more impressive, in the grave and impressive Report issued by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1909, than the practical demonstration it afforded of the inter-dependence of social problems.

This is a truth which should be kept constantly in mind in the consideration and discussion of questions connected with the oldest and most indispensable of all forms of economic activity.

It is a commonplace to assert that nothing contributes more to political stability or to social contentment than a sound and appropriate system of land tenure. The recognition of this truth has undoubtedly conduced to an acceptance of the much more questionable proposition that there is a logical distinction between the principle of private property in land and other forms of private property. Not land only, as J. S. Mill suggested,<sup>1</sup> but all property must be held by individuals subject to the paramount claims of the community at large. In its own interests the

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Political Economy*, II. ii. § 6.



community permits individuals to hold and to enjoy the property which they have acquired. The claim of the individual does not depend upon the fact that the wealth which he possesses has been created by himself or by those from whom he has legally inherited or acquired it. But if it did there would be no reason for the exclusion of land from the category of private property any more than carpets or shirts. Rent-yielding land is, as a rule, a manufactured product just as much as motor-cars or furniture or other forms of "personalty." But the title to its possession depends, like the title to other things, on expediency. Civilised States have, in the main, deemed it wise to recognise a title to private property, as the most effective means of stimulating the production of wealth; and until wealth has been produced, it is idle to discuss schemes for its equitable distribution among the several parties who have combined to produce it.

But this broad justification of private property will also suggest the limitations to which the principle is subject.

If any given system of land tenure should fail to produce those results, political, social, and economic, in the expectation of which society has sanctioned it, the system stands condemned. Society is entirely free, with adequate notice and with due regard to the legal rights of individuals, to terminate the existing system and try a new experiment. But it will not lightly or carelessly embark upon the task of reconstruction.

A retrospective glance over the preceding pages would seem to justify the conclusion that the evolution of the English land system has been due, in the main, to the unimpeded operation of natural causes. From time to time their operation has been warped—now in this direction,

now in that—by some artificial interruption, legal or social. But after brief interruptions the evolutionary process has been resumed.

It may be that we have now arrived at a juncture when violent interruption is imperatively demanded in the interests of the community at large. If so, the interests of individuals must not be allowed to stand in the way, provided that the community is prepared to pay honestly for the extinction of the legal rights of the individual. But if there is to be violent upheaval and radical reconstruction a very strong case must be made out. Presumption is on the side of the existing order, if that order be the result of natural growth and not an artificial product.

If the existing land system fails to secure the highest aggregate yield of which the soil is capable; if it fails to maintain and retain upon the land a race of men and women, strong in physique and adequate in numbers; if it fails to contribute to political stability and social contentment, there is at least fair ground for enquiry as to the causes of its shortcoming. The system must stand at the bar of public opinion on the defensive. If, after an impartial hearing, it is condemned, private interests must not and will not be permitted to obstruct reform, nor to withstand, if need be, wholesale reconstruction. *Salus populi suprema lex.* The land system was made for man, not man for the land system.

It has been no part of my purpose to obtrude, in the preceding pages, my own opinions. Perhaps they have emerged, with as much distinctness as is called for. They may be summarised in Canning's famous aphorism: "Those who oppose improvement because it is innovation may have to submit to innovation which is not improvement." Equally, however,

it would seem to be the duty of all who can rise superior to party attachments not to permit the greatest and most fundamental of all English industries to be made the sport of innovators who are not improvers. "France," said Napoleon III., "knows how to make revolutions ; she does not know how to make reforms." Englishmen flatter themselves that they know how to effect reforms which avert revolutions. That the land system calls for reform and readjustment in detail I have attempted to show ; but I submit that there have not been revealed any such defects as would justify revolutionary reconstruction.



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