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Author(s): George W. Russell

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The Problem of Rural Life

By *GEORGE W. RUSSELL*

V.

THE true significance of the movement promoted by Sir Horace Plunkett is that it is an attempt to build up a new social order in Ireland. A social order of some kind we must have in rural districts, which will bring men into mutually beneficial relations with each other, which will create or draw out the highest economic, political and human qualities in the people, and remind them daily that they are units of a society from which they receive benefits, and to which their loyalty and affection will naturally flow. A man is not human in the true sense of the word unless he fits into humanity. A disorganised society is like a heap of bricks. Bricks may be made, but there is no reason for their existence unless they are to form part of a building. A social order in rural districts may take on a great many forms. Every organisation makes its own demands on its units; they get accustomed to it, and character is shaped accordingly. You may have the feudal system, which has prevailed in England for so long, where the owner of broad acres was the head of his district. It was his hereditary duty to look after the welfare of his tenants, and they in their turn appealed to him in their troubles; they voted for him and gave him political power. The feudal system at its best produced good results owing to mutual support. *Noblesse oblige* was not without meaning in England. Another kind of social order existed for long periods in Russia, where land was placed at the disposal of the village communities. The Council of the Mir decided periodically about its allotment among the members of the commune in proportion to their families and needs. They grew to recognise no claim to land except that based on the power of the man and his family to work it; and this system

THE IRISH REVIEW

generated its own peculiar social virtues and ideas of justice, solidarity, and unselfishness. We have testimony from many observers to the splendid character created among members of European communes. Wherever there is mutual aid, wherever there is constant give and take, wherever the prosperity of the individual depends directly and obviously on the prosperity of the community about him, there the social order tends to produce fine types of character, with a devotion to public ideas; and this is the real object of all government. There is the co-operative system, as we find it in Germany, with associations based on mutual liability, where mutual trust is engendered based on long experience of each other's character. The forms which social life may take are many. The best is that which produces the finest type of human being with the social or kindly instincts most strongly developed. The worst thing which can happen to a social community is to have no social order at all, where every man is for himself and the devil may take the hindmost. Generally in such a community he takes the front rank as well as the stragglers. The phrase, "Every man for himself," is one of the maxims in the gospel according to Beelzebub. The devil's game with men is to divide and conquer them. Isolate your man from obligations to a social order and in most cases his soul drops into the pit like a rotten apple from the Tree of Life. Fine character in a race is evolved and not taught. It is not due to copy-book headings or moral maxims given to the youth of the country. It arises from the structure of society and the appeal it makes on them. One man in every hundred is a freak, a person lit up by a lamp from within. He may be a poet, an artist, a saint, a social reformer, a musician, a politician, a person who has found the law of his own being and acts and wills from his own centre. As for the other ninety-nine, they are just what the social order makes them. They would, for the most part, prefer to do what is right, but if it is difficult they will agree to the wrong. Let one trader in a street adulterate his goods and sell them cheap and

THE PROBLEM OF RURAL LIFE

get customers. If unchecked, in five years' time half the traders in his neighbourhood will be adulterating what they sell in order to compete and live. An experimental test of honesty was made in Glasgow a couple of years ago by a man who went straight down the streets and bought butter at every shop. Of fifty-two samples only two were unadulterated. All the vendors were normal beings simply acting as their neighbours acted. The social virtues are built up by a social order. With no fine organisation of society the ninety and nine odd persons who have no inner light fall into the pit.

We have not had a social order in Ireland since the time of the clans. Our ancient aristocracies won their positions by the sword. They drew the sword on behalf of their clansmen, and the clansmen laboured for the chiefs. The aristocracy which succeeded them drew their rents on their own behalf, and soon found nobody to support them in Ireland. The chiefs of the old clans won their right to live on their clansmen by their readiness to die for their clansmen, and the passionate loyalty of the clansmen to their chiefs is recorded in many a song and story. Our last aristocracy, for the most part, could not bear the sight of their tenants, and their tenants shot at them through the hedges when they got the chance. Ireland has gained nothing in national character by the farce of a feudal system which existed during the last century. The movement I am writing about is an attempt to build up a true social order.

A social order should provide for three things—for economic development, for political stability, and a desirable social life. I will try to show how the co-operative movement provides for these things, which are truly our most pressing national necessities. I have already given some account of the disabilities unorganised farmers suffered from in the profitable pursuit of their industry, how the agricultural interest became, like a paralytic with no control over his limbs, unable to act powerfully on its own behalf. I am not going to give any minute description of the various kinds of rural associations promoted by the Irish

THE IRISH REVIEW

Agricultural Organisation Society. Nearly everybody is by this time more or less familiar with the work of creameries, agricultural, poultry, flax, home industry, and credit societies. The dairy societies have released the farmer from the bondage to the butter merchant and proprietor, and given back to him the control of the processes of manufacture and sale. In the credit societies farmers join together, and creating by their union a greater security than any of them could offer individually, they are able to get money to finance their farming operations at very low rates. The joint-stock banks are for the most part lending money to these societies at wholesale terms and letting them retail it among their members. Generally speaking, it has been found possible to borrow money from three to four per cent. and to lend it for productive purposes at the popular rate of one penny a month for every pound employed. The trust auctioneer's methods, the gombeen man's methods, cannot stand this competition. The poultry societies collect the eggs of their members, they grade and pack them properly, and market them through their own agencies. The flax societies erect or hire scutch mills and see that the important work of scutching the flax is performed with the requisite care. The agricultural societies purchase seeds, implements, fertilisers, feeding stuffs, and agricultural requirements for their members. Many of them hold thousands of pounds worth of machinery too expensive for the individual farmer to buy. The societies buy their requirements at wholesale prices and insure good quality. The home industries societies have made hopeful beginnings with lace, crochet, embroidery, and rug-making to provide work for country girls. About one hundred thousand Irish country people are already members of co-operative societies, and their trade turnover this year will be close on three million pounds. I mention these figures because the modern mind is indisposed to attach much importance to social reforms where their importance cannot be instantly translated into an equivalent in the universally intelligible language of money. Now, what is

THE PROBLEM OF RURAL LIFE

really most interesting in the character of the Irish co-operative movement is not that its promoters have started associations like those I have mentioned. All over Europe similar associations have been in existence for many years. What is really interesting is the way in which the Irish social reformers are developing and adapting to Irish needs methods of combination which have long been familiar to Continental farmers. The societies in Ireland are losing their specialised character, their limitation of objects to this purpose or that, and are more and more assuming a character which can only be described by calling them general purposes societies. The successful dairy society begins to take up the work of an agricultural, poultry, or credit society in addition to the work for which the farmers were originally organised in the district. It is gradually absorbing into one large well-managed association all the rural business connected with agriculture in each parish. The societies are controlled by committees elected by the members, and in a few years' time, instead of the dislocation and separation of interests which has been so disastrous in its effects, instead of innumerable petty businesses all striving for their own rather than the general welfare, there will be in each parish one large association able to pay well for expert management, with complete control over all processes of purchase, manufacture and sale, and run by the farmers with the energy of self-interest. These district associations are rapidly linking themselves on to large federations for purchase and sale, which again are controlled by representatives of the societies, and through these the farmers are able to act powerfully in the market. They become their own middlemen. All the links between production in the farm and sale to the consumer are getting connected into one system, and that controlled by the agriculturist. These societies, their federations, and the I.A.O.S. form the nucleus, and a very strong nucleus, for a vast farmers' trade union, ready to protect their interests, to help them socially, politically and economically; and this formation of a farmers' trade union has become absolutely

THE IRISH REVIEW

necessary in modern times. Every industry is organised—engineers, bricklayers, carpenters, dock hands, masons, boiler-makers—all have their trade unions. Run through all the trades; for every one of them there is a trade union, and we all know what they have done for the workers. The co-operative stores in the towns are trade unions of consumers, which protect them against middlemen, and sometimes against manufacturers. The trade federations look after the interests of their members, and all these bodies, as they grow strong and insist powerfully on their own rights, have a natural tendency to squeeze the unorganised and relegate them to the ranks of the sweated. It has been the action of some of these powerfully organised bodies which has had much to say to the decay of agriculture. The workers in the towns clamoured for cheap food. Let it come from anywhere, they must be fed. The manufacturers backed them up because they knew there were two alternatives to be faced. The purchasing power of money, its capacity to buy bread and meat, had to be increased, or else wages had to be raised and profits eaten into. They preferred to increase the purchasing power of money, and all the business skill and organising power of Great Britain was used to flood the market with corn and beef, with fruit, and farm and dairy produce. It mattered not at all to them that, in the face of this competition, agriculture rotted away outside their own cities, and that the farmers in distant countries broke up more virgin soil, while at their own doors the land went back to nature, and the all-conquering grass crept up with its battalions of thin green spears to the very outskirts of the towns. It was immediately easier to invite the world to send its supplies of food than it was to develop the natural prodigious food producing capacity of the fields about them. The farmers were unorganised. They had no trades union, no powerful voice to plead in their behalf, and to-day the deer forests in Scotland, the game preserves in England, the deserts of grass in Ireland, are gigantic illustrations of the desolation and decay which falls on the

THE PROBLEM OF RURAL LIFE

industry when men work alone and are not united to protect their interests.

By the very nature of agriculture it needs this protection more than any other industry. It is the basic human occupation. Let it fail, and humanity must disappear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the field war for the lordship of the planet. Our princes and captains of industry, and all they control, the high-built factories and titanic mills, might all disappear without man disappearing; but cut away man from the fields and fruits of the earth and in six months there will be silence in the streets, and in half a century the forests will be butting at London and leaning their shoulders against the houses to overwhelm them. Agriculture separates its workers, while the factories and mills bring their workers together. Because of this isolation of the workers in the field, because each man has his plot of earth to till, and because he is made more or less solitary, there is all the more need for organisation. Legislatures work their will and enact their laws, and these become part of the social order, and have the army and police to put them in force long before the farmer has heard of the law, long before he can make any protest. Markets are occupied and the ways to them blocked before the unorganised farmer can take action. He is squeezed out perpetually by the acute business man, and made more and more a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. The tendency of this oppression is to take the higher, more intellectual, and more profitable departments of agricultural production out of the farmer's hands and reduce him to the position of a manual labourer.

It is the natural rebellion of farmers against such a destiny which has brought about their organisation over Europe and their fierce battles with trusts in America. But these associations, while primarily called into being by the necessity of self-defence, have higher aims, and the creators of these associations all the world over have ever mingled the idea of protection with splendid dreams of the building up of a rural civilisation. They

THE IRISH REVIEW

soon realised that with the union of men to help each other came the promise and potency of a progress inconceivable before; that with more economic business methods, with cheapness in purchase, combination in sale, with science in the farm and dairy, with expensive machinery co-operatively owned, and with the complete control of their own industry—farmers could create and retain a communal wealth which could purchase for them the comforts and some of the luxuries of civilisation. It is no unrealisable dream, but a perfectly practical programme, which offers farmers, as the result of organisation and loyal co-operation with each other, not only political power and economic prosperity, but also a more intellectual and enjoyable social life. We will yet see the electric light and the telephone in rural districts, and the village hall with a pleasant hum of friendship in it. Ireland, while it is a late comer among the nations into the field, has already developed the most complete programme. The promoters of the co-operative movement here have thought out a whole system, have made an imaginative co-ordination of isolated methods of organisation, and, profiting by the experience of Europe, are beginning their ideals where the pioneers concluded theirs. We had greater need in Ireland to think intensely and passionately on these subjects, because the Continental nations never neglected agriculture nor treated it with the scornful contempt and neglect of the English-speaking peoples. We were lucky, too, in Ireland in having a statesman to guide us in our work, a man who could think round his problem, see three sides to it—its length, its breadth, its thickness—who wanted better farming, better business, and better living in Ireland, and knew how all these might be obtained.

The opposition to this work of agricultural organisation had its origin in the little country towns which, for the most part, produce nothing, and are mere social parasites. Of course there are country towns in Ireland which are manufacturing centres and justify their existence. We have our linen mills in Ulster, and here and there we come across towns which produce and

THE PROBLEM OF RURAL LIFE

create wealth and give employment. But we are forced to ask ourselves whether most of our Irish country towns really serve the country well? Do they create any social life for the surrounding rural districts other than that based on the facilities for a social glass? Do they attract people with any other lure than that one might indicate by saying—where there is a whiskey bottle in the midst, there three or four will gather together? Our small Irish country towns, in their external characteristics, are so arid and unlovely that one longs for a lodge in some vast wilderness as a relief from the unbearable meanness. Better look out on boundless sand and boundless sky, on two immensities, than on these mean and straggling towns, those disreputable public houses, those uncleansed footways like miry manure yards. For if one has a soul and any love for beauty he must feel like an anarchist if he strays into an Irish country town, and must long for bombs to wreck and dynamite to obliterate. If we examine into the internal economy of these warts or excrescences on the face of nature, we find for the most part they are absolutely non-productive. They create no wealth, they generate no civic virtues, certainly they manifest none. They are merely the channels through which porter and whiskey run from breweries and distilleries into the human stomach; and whatever trade there is is distributive only. There is no intellectual life in them. Hardly a country town has a book-shop. Here and there you will find a yellow assortment of ancient penny novelettes or song-books in a window, with the dead flies of yester year still unswept from the paper, or a row of sensational tales in gaudy colours, the sensational tales of thirty years ago, and a few sixpenny reprints. If this business of reading is to be catered for it ought to be done well. If we cannot give the best, we had much better have no reading at all. Better the ignorance of great literature—which left the Gaelic poets centuries ago to their own resources, their own traditions and folk tales, out of which came songs as natural and sweet as the songs of the birds—than these dust heaps of cheap prints,

THE IRISH REVIEW

without high purpose, and glimmering all over with the phosphorescence of mental decay. Nearly every country in the world supplies its own literature but Ireland, whose appetite for reading Irish books would not supply one single literary man in Ireland with an income sufficient for him to live as comfortably as a sergeant of Constabulary. Towns ought to be conductors, catching the lightnings of the human mind and distributing them all around their area. The Irish country towns only collect mental bogs about them. We have grown so accustomed to these arid oases of humanity that we accept them in a hopeless kind of way, whereas we should rage and prophesy over them as the prophets of ancient Israel did over Tyre and Sidon. And, indeed, a lordly magnificence of wickedness is not so hopeless a thing to contemplate as a dead level of petty iniquity, the soul's death in life, without ideas or aspirations. The Chaldeans—those who built up the Tower of Heaven in defiance of Heaven—had so much greatness of soul that the next thing they might do would be to turn it into a house of prayer; but lives filled with everlasting littleness fill one with deep despair and madness of heart. We want pioneers of civilisation to go out into our country districts with a divine passion in them, the desire of the God implanted spirit, to make the world about it into some likeness of the Kingdom of Light. There are no barriers in our way except ourselves and our own supineness. The men in any rural district, united together, could make the land they live in as lovely to look on as the fabled gardens in the valley of Damascus. They could have fruit trees along the hedgerows, and make the country roads beautiful with colour in spring. This has been done in many a rural commune on the Continent, and there is no reason why it should not be done here. Only let us get our men together, get them organised, and one improvement will rapidly follow another. For all great deeds by races, all civilisations, were built up by the voluntary efforts of men united together. Sometimes one feels as if there were some higher mind in humanity which could not act through

THE PROBLEM OF RURAL LIFE

individuals, but only through brotherhoods and groups of men. Anyhow, the civilisation which is based on individualism is mean, and the civilisation based upon great guilds, fraternities, communes and associations is of a higher order. If we are to have any rural civilisation in Ireland it must spring out of co-operation.

I have shown, I hope, as clearly as I can, within the limits of the space at my disposal, how the organisation of the farmers in societies and federations enables the will of the rural population to have free play with its own problems, as the will of a healthy man directs the motions of the body, and he is enabled to perform efficiently his work in the world. It is the organisation of the rural interests to enable it to meet the organisation of the urban interests; but lest it should be supposed that this concentration of rural energies would adversely affect the towns, I will deal with this question later, and also show how agricultural organisation provides a solution for many national problems which are a cause of deep anxiety to those whose interests in life are not exhausted by the solution of their personal problems, but who also think of the destinies of the nation to which they belong.