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How the Labourer Lives by B. Seebom Rowntree; May Kendall; Les Ouvriers Agricoles en Belgique by Benoit Bouché

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REVIEWS OF STATISTICAL AND ECONOMIC BOOKS.

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1.—I. *How the Labourer Lives*.—By B. Seeböhm Rowntree and May Kendall. 342 pp., 8vo. London: Thos. Nelson and Sons, 1913. Price 2s.

II. *Les Ouvriers Agricoles en Belgique*. Par Benoit Bouché. 261 pp., 8vo. Brussels: Misch et Thron, 1913.

I. “‘Potatoes have more stay in them!’ said one villager, with deplorable ignorance of food values.” It is with such matters that the authors of this work are concerned, with the wages of the agricultural labourer, the things on which his wife spends them and the value of the family’s weekly diet, in terms of protein and calories of energy value. On the basis of Professor Atwater’s standard of food requirements it is taken “as an established fact that a family of five persons whose total income does not exceed 20s. 6d. and whose rent is 2s., is living below the ‘poverty line’” (p. 30). In the 42 families investigated, the average shortage in protein was found to be 24 per cent., and in energy value 10 per cent. (p. 303). In fact, only one family passed the combined tests, though several had calories to spare. And from this it is concluded that under-feeding is a serious evil in village life, the wife and children suffering more than the man, who as the breadwinner is given a certain minimum by tacit consent in order that he may be able to do his work. The authors lament the continuous exodus from agricultural to industrial life. “The physique of the town population,” say they, “in the past has been maintained to some extent by constant reinforcements of the anæmic town dwellers by countrymen. But the source from which these reinforcements have been obtained is rapidly becoming exhausted. Already the country dwellers have given up their best, and the prospect, from the point of view of the maintenance of the national physique, is not bright. It is doubtful whether the health conditions in the cities are being improved as rapidly as the vitality of the country districts is being exhausted” (p. 14). But real wages have at least doubled since 1834. How then did the labourers in the hungry ‘forties supply such good stock to the towns? Are we to suppose that these labourers were living on the good stock of the eighteenth century, or that somehow the requirements were less severe then than now? Perhaps in those days they sustained themselves, like certain plants, by affixing nitrogen from the air.

We seem driven into a dilemma. Either the country for the last century has been supplying the towns with inefficient stock, or an efficient stock has issued from a population maintained on something much below the Atwater standard. Furthermore, we are sorry that Mr. Rowntree, with his profound knowledge of Belgium, does not hazard some conjecture as to the comparative value of the labourer's diet in England and abroad. We read, it is true, that "the paid labourer in most Continental countries does not, as a rule, intend to remain a wage earner all his life . . . he is always looking forward to becoming his own master" (p. 19). But looking forward to autonomy, and autonomy itself, do not as such yield proteins and calories.

Finally, though the budgets have been selected from countries with different wage rates, low, medium and high (Oxford, Berks, Essex, Leicester, Yorks), it is not clear at what point in the scale of each village the single budget therefrom selected stands. Many of the families examined cannot pay a little subscription to the village reading room, or join the cricket and football clubs, or go to the parish tea-meeting and harvest thanksgiving. Who then does? Village artisans or better paid agricultural labourers? Or is the explanation this, that for a period of years, 10 to 15, when he has a young family, the agricultural labourer passes through a stage when he can afford none of these things, although he can and does before and after. The frequent allusions to debts owing at the local shops suggests that this may be so; for shopkeepers do not lend unless they are likely to recover one day. "I've never begun to pay off my debts yet," says one woman. "I shall begin, all well, when John is fourteen" (p. 263). We may agree with the North countryman who says that "the farm man who marries without having saved anything is done" (p. 322), but so also is the city clerk—and a great many other people too.

II. M. Bouché's work presents a clear and well arranged picture of the agricultural labourer in Belgium at the present day. Agricultural labour is a problem there as serious as it is with us; for England and Belgium are *par excellence* countries of industry, and, as we read this book, we are reminded again and again of similarities with England. As in England, the soils and, in consequence, the agriculture vary, from the market gardening of the Dunes and the tiny farms of Flanders and the Pays de Herve to the large scale farming on the sandy loam around Namur, and the farming, medium, small and large, in the forest district of the Ardennes. As in England, there is a great scarcity of labour, especially of day labourers and farm servants. We have our own annual immigration of Irish harvesters, and the men of Flanders journey in the summer to the big farms in the south of Belgium or across the French border, to harvest hay, cereals and beetroots. The harvester working by contract in gangs is, indeed, an international institution. Denmark has its Poles, East Prussia its Saxons, and the Argentine has its Italians, who yearly make their journey across the ocean. As in England, agricul-

tural wages in Belgium have risen during the last 50 years from a starvation level, such as we had in the hungry 'forties, to a rate at least double. In the author's tables of wages for day labourers the most frequent figures for summer and winter rates are 3 fr. (2s. 6d.) and 2.50 fr. (2s. 1d.) respectively—sums hardly up to the average in England, if we include extras, which are not so frequent or considerable in Belgium. But the rates vary very much from district to district, being highest in districts of large farms, which are also the districts from which the drain to the towns and the mines is most acute. This is an interesting fact. For in England the low wage counties are in the east and south, with their big farms and traditions of feudalism and charitable aid; while the well-paid labourer of the north lives in an industrial environment, and works much harder, so it is said. In Belgium the low wages occur in Flanders and the Campine, where small cultivators, the hardest workers of all, are most numerous and where the industrial alternatives are fewer. This suggests that the action of industry in curtailing the supply of rural labour—the common element in the high wage districts of both countries—is the most powerful cause of high wages in agriculture.

But between England and Belgium there is one supreme difference. The Belgium labourer is a bird of passage, literally so where he is a migrating task worker, and in effect so in other cases; for the labourer only stays on the land if he can become a small cultivator for himself. "*Ce n'est que lorsque l'ouvrier agricole sera petit cultivateur autonome ou ouvrier industriel permanent qu'il sera fixé*" (p. 37). Hence in Belgium "*la terre se loue plus cher en détail qu'en gros.*" Ownership of the soil, though in many hands, is nevertheless denied to the majority. But all are candidates for access to it, not merely the small self-supporting cultivator, but also the industrial worker, who by cheap railway fares is able to live in the country and works there his strip of ground. The result is something quite alien to English experience: "*Ce sont ces petits cultivateurs qui constituent le véritable prolétariat des champs*" (p. 89); and this being so, there is still a chance in the country for socialist propaganda on co-operative lines. The industrial population being more evenly distributed, urban rents are not so high as in England, but M. Bouché calculates that accommodation costing £5 12s. per annum in the country is represented by a figure of £7 5s. in the town, while the price of foodstuffs is lower for country districts in all articles but sugar. In England the difference of rents is greater, but the countryman is said to pay more for the things he buys at the shop. Finally, Belgium has evolved a custom, which must surely be almost unique in the world. So great in some parts is the scarcity of labour that the farmer regularly does services for his labourers, ploughing, carting, etc., and for these "*corvées*" the labourer in return condescends to help the farmer with his hands: "*C'est le fermier qui est devenu le 'vassal' du manœuvre*" (p. 171).

C.R.F.