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Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium by B. Seebom Rowntree

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Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Vol. 73, No. 6/7 (Jun. – Jul., 1910), pp. 781–785

Published by: [Wiley](#) for the [Royal Statistical Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2339931>

Accessed: 25/06/2014 02:06

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description of the life of the rural labourer in the middle ages. The author sums up its drawbacks thus: "No books, no newspapers, no change of scene by cheap excursions, no village school, no politics." It is, perhaps, doubtfully true to say that the fourteenth century labourer had no politics—he had rather a tendency to violent politics—and it is to be feared that the modern labourer would feel the absence of bicycles almost as keenly as the lack of books. But it is at least arguable that the life of the rural labourer five or six centuries ago had much to compensate for its hardship and squalor. If its pleasures would have little savour now, it is also true that its pains were less poignant than they appear to this less hardy generation.

R.H.R.

6.—*Land and labour: lessons from Belgium.* By B. Seebohm Rowntree. 633 pp. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1910. Price 10s. 6d. net.

At once statistical, economic, and political, Mr. Rowntree's exhaustive volume offers to the student a store house of opportune and illuminating facts. Some of these facts may have been already recorded and somewhere available, but they have not hitherto been brought together in such convenient juxtaposition, while the others, and they are many, which have been unearthed by this laborious enquiry, are here elaborately discussed in their comparative bearing on our own social economy. The form in which they appear testifies to a vast amount of painstaking research by the author. Such a work deserves and must receive the cordial acknowledgment of any enquirer into the problems which differentiate the agricultural and industrial life of a country like Belgium from that of neighbouring states, and from the conditions of Great Britain in particular. It is not necessary that one should entirely concur in all of the deductions made from the completed enquiry to see what really good work has been accomplished, and what valuable data are here presented, both for future reference and for economic argument in the perennial controversies which arise over such questions as those of small and large holdings, of masters and workmen, of landlords and tenants. Not a few sidelights on some of the immediately political or fiscal problems which are prominent in our day, on points of taxation or on the movement of land values are also suggested by an examination, such as these pages offer, of what the Belgian has to teach the Englishman by way of example or by way of warning. The cockpit of Europe as Belgium has been described in international warfare, its variously divided surface, and its mixture of Latin and Teutonic races, alike present a field for the study of conflicting theories, and leave us an impression of a drawn battle and an unsettled balance of economic doctrine. Mr. Rowntree is well entitled, after the long study he has made, to hold firmly to his own views as to the teaching which may be legitimately drawn from the disputed issues, even if we are not always convinced that the relative importance of the factors, which make up so complex a national problem, has been rightly weighed in every one of these pregnant pages.

The physical character and peculiarities of the Belgian territory, its land system, its industrial and agricultural growth are here successfully portrayed with a thoroughness which will ensure for Mr. Rowntree's labour the gratitude of economists and statisticians. The very varied races and very varied soil, and the close mixture of the industrial with the agricultural or at least the rural inhabitants, present at once a parallel and a contrast in the distribution of a densely-packed population on a relatively narrow surface, such as perhaps nowhere else in Europe can we so conveniently find.

From the statistical point of view a reviewer naturally fastens with interest on the results of Mr. Rowntree's estimates of the existing character of the land distribution of country which seems to give the status of landowner to 10 per cent. of the population, and indeed to 18 per cent. of the persons over 21 years of age. Evidence is furnished of the existence of well-nigh 720,000 owners on 6,895,000 acres, whereof only 27 owners can claim the dignity of holding a 5,000-acre estate. Three-fourths of the whole Belgian landowners possess less than 5 acres each, and 95 per cent. will be found to own less than 25 acres each. Over one quarter of the soil of Belgium is in the hands of owners under this 25-acre limit. Some idea of the trouble involved in reaching these figures is offered by Mr. Rowntree's explanation that the data relied upon are not the mere quotation of the official figures giving the superficial "number of landowners." That figure indeed shows nearly twice as many entries (1,302,737 in 1907) as have just been quoted. The larger figures are discovered to represent not separate proprietors but separate units of property in different communes, while it is found that some Belgians own land in 30, 40, or even 100 communes. Much closer investigations of the existing land registers were thus required to arrive at a closer estimate. These employed, we are told, the labour of something like 383 Government officials and 101 private clerks dealing with 300,000 record cards "weighing over $1\frac{1}{2}$ tons." To find the analysed result of all this search one must refer to the tables of the volume which throw much new light on the land diffusion which characterises Belgium. Yet with all this diffusion we are asked to remember that Belgium, though a country of small holdings, is not by any means a typical country of peasant proprietors. Only 28 per cent. of the holdings in number—representing however one-third part of the cultivated land—is actually "owner-farmed." On two-thirds of the agricultural surface it appears the system of tenant farming prevails. Even if, according to another calculation, of a more speculative character—where the survey is carried beyond the land properly cultivated, and common-land woods and forests are embraced, and the farming of the latter groups is somewhat tentatively attributed to the owners—the surface owner-farmed would scarcely reach one-half. Such facts lend importance to the information here collected of the very high rents prevailing in Belgium, and the intensive culture distinguishing certain regions. The author "averages" the rent of agricultural land in Belgium at 36s. 3d. per acre, against 20s. in England, and the value of the

soil—with, of course, enormous variations, which go far to discount the use of an “average” in such matters—at nearly 60*l.* per acre, against 25*l.* in this country. In dealing with the forcing up of land values in Belgium and the high rents which result from this keen demand for land, Mr. Rowntree urges that the State ought to claim a tribute from the unearned increment accruing to what he describes as mere “accidental owners.” Any discussion of the basis for this claim, and of the meaning of accidental ownership, would carry a mere reviewer perilously near embarking on some of the party political issues of the day nearer home. It is more to the purpose to call attention to the data here collected to show, so far as the Belgium official statistics may be implicitly followed—and there is room for some hesitation here as regards the earlier figures—the progress which agriculture, as a whole, has made in the last fifty years, and the relatively large proportion of the population which changing practice and more intensive cultivation has, here at all events, apparently succeeded in retaining on the soil. If even in Belgium there was 8 per cent. less of the cultivated land under cereals in 1895 than in 1846, it was mainly in wheat that any reduction occurred, and the areas under all crops for use by live stock were augmented. Wheat growing is quoted as falling off by 25½ per cent. in the fifty years, the surface under oats rising 23 per cent., and barley and rye remaining stationary. It is in the larger use of roots and of double or catch crops that the recent change of methods of farming is conspicuous. A claim is however made that better farming has vastly increased even the cereal produce, and, if we can accept the official reckonings at both dates as similarly arrived at, an acre of wheat now produces 18¼ cwts. against 12¼ cwts. in 1871-80 and 11 cwts. in 1846. Parallel advances are suggested in rye and oats. After all that has been said, however, of the spread of agricultural knowledge and the devotion of the Belgian peasant to closer forms of culture, it surprises one to note that Belgium has still but 64 per cent. of her land actually in cultivation. This is much the same ratio as France and Germany, and it is less than England and Wales can show (73 per cent.). Whether the definitions of “cultivation” in these countries are always identical is perhaps a matter of argument in these comparisons. The agricultural statistician may view with not a little interest the figures here quoted for the development of the live stock industry—other, of course, than sheep where the Belgians have lost heavily—and indeed the movement upwards in numbers of cattle and swine in Belgium is considerable. The increase in the cattle seems to date mainly since 1880, and there are questions of statistical enumeration to be considered which possibly may affect the figures. In any case the extent of the Belgian efforts here described to provide for its dense population will repay study, even if some of the not insignificant import figures quoted require a still further dissection, and may suggest a reference to and a comparison with other data, which have been forthcoming on the extent of the Belgian foreign food supply. If it were not ungenerous to suggest the extension of so vast an enquiry, one might have

welcomed some reference to the Belgian price records, which M. H. Denis has lately published.

An interesting section of Mr. Rowntree's work discusses the dimensions of the population actually engaged in Belgian agriculture. As elsewhere, and indeed as with ourselves, the official statistics on this point are difficult to handle, and leave a good deal of room for doubt. We are reminded that neither the 1,204,810 persons who have been regarded as "agricultural" in the agricultural census of 1895, nor the much smaller total of 697,372, which was credited to this industry by the general census of five years later, are to be taken as absolute facts. The larger figure seems to embrace many individual workers and their wives whose immediate work is really industrial, and whose concern with the small land plots they held was quite immaterial as a matter of income. The smaller figure again errs by defect in omitting to count exhaustively the whole of the female labour, which is inevitably involved by a small holding system of agriculture. However, even by the lower estimate some 15 per cent. of the Belgian population over 12 years of age would seem to be agricultural, and nearly a quarter of the "occupied" portion of the community might be assigned to this category. Mr. Rowntree indeed finds "on the land" 95 persons for each square mile in Belgium against 28 in Great Britain. A distinctive feature of difference, too, arises when we find it shown that 35 per cent. of the Belgian agricultural workers were labourers and 65 per cent. farmers or their families. These are proportions which it may be said are about exactly reversed in our own case in this country. The female working element in the Belgian agricultural group naturally rises high, as their type of agriculture imposes much labour on women. It is put here at 23 per cent. which, it will be remembered, is considerably above even the 19 per cent. credited to Scotland, and it contrasts forcibly with the mere 5 per cent. to which female labour, according to such records as we have, has been reduced in England and Wales. The growing industrialism of Belgium is nevertheless tending to restrict the proportion of the workers now reckoned as agricultural, although there is not, it would appear, any absolute decline, as with ourselves, in the numbers on a fifty years survey, but even an increase of some 11 per cent. The industrial element however was only 7 per cent. in 1846, whereas in 1896 it is put at 18 per cent.

How far the relative success of the small farm system with its intensive culture, high rents and high land values, has another side in the low pay, lower standard of living and hard grinding work of the Belgian peasant, and in his defective educational provision is a question which merits grave consideration. On the latter point we are told that nearly 20 per cent. of the population over 12 cannot read or write. These drawbacks are to be weighed when a contrast is made with British conditions and the higher wages and greater relative comfort of the agricultural labourer of our own country is not forgotten in this most useful contribution to a study of the Belgian life. The volume offers most abundant and elaborate information respecting the cost and modes of living and the

considerations governing the low Belgian wages. No reviewer would be justified, however, in attempting to exhaust the many spheres of enquiry here opened, such as the relatively large alcoholic consumption, which we are here told makes the Belgian workers toil for more than two months out of every twelve simply to pay their drink bill.

Emphatically, however, should the student be advised in his perusal of this book to turn to the weighty statistics given of the distinctive and most valuable aid which Belgium enjoys in the matter of internal transport over all her competitors. Not only does her intensely-developed mileage of ordinary railways put her well ahead of other States, but she possesses, in her remarkable system of light railways and cheap transport rates, facilities which perhaps have as much as anything to do with the profitable growth of intensive cultivation. The striking advantage of a light railway system—which, relatively to area, is nine times as extensive as in Germany, fourteen times as great as in France, and more than thirty-eight times as great as we can show in this country—is a very material addition to the growing knowledge and practice of scientific manuring, and the development of co-operative methods in largely helping the progress of the Belgian effort to make the most out of a soil which has no special advantages for the maintenance of a densely-packed population. P.G.C.

7.—*Histoire économique de la propriété, des salaires, des denrées et de tous les prix en général depuis l'an 1200 jusqu'en l'an 1800.* Par Le Vicomte G. d'Avenel. Tome v. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1909.

This addition to the series of substantial volumes on the history of prices in France covers the same ground as the smaller volume, "Les Riches depuis sept cent ans," recently noticed in these columns (see *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, September, 1909). It is, therefore, unnecessary to survey the conclusions at which the author arrives. The present volume, in a wealth of footnotes and in a bulky appendix, supplies much of the material which has served as the basis of the statements in the text. The appendices, as in the preceding volumes of the series, give in detail the references to the original sources of information. Tables setting forth the estimated classification of French families, both according to the amount of their income and that of the property they possess, the latter based on the statistics of inheritances, are included, as well as extracts from ancient documents. A further table compares the grouping of families, in accordance with their wealth, in England and in France. The author criticises the views of Mr. Bernard Mallet laid before the Society in 1908, and contends that they result in an underestimate of British capital wealth. A.W.F.

8.—*La mortalità secondo l'età, e la durata della vita economicamente produttiva.* By G. Mortara. 84 pp., 8vo. Rome: Co-operativa Tipografica Manuzio, 1908.

The numerous collections which have been made lately of the life-tables of different countries materially facilitate the investigation of various interesting problems which have not hitherto been