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The Economic Journal

Labour upon the Land. Edited by J. A. Hobson. (London : Swan Sonnenschein & Co. 1895.)

How to keep the land of England in cultivation and to keep the population on the land is doubtless the most urgent economic problem of our time. It was, therefore, well done to print this report of a conference upon 'land, co-operation and the unemployed' held at the Holborn Town Hall in October of last year. At the same time we must confess to a sense of disappointment in reading these papers. They are many and with one or two exceptions they are slight. We are left with no very precise idea of the different classes to be provided for and of the different means to be used with each. Allotments and even 'three acres and a cow' are excellent for the labourer whose chief dependence is on his wages, but they cannot employ a man's whole time or suffice for his whole subsistence. With regard to co-operation on small holdings the experiments of Lord Carrington and Major Poore are most valuable, but ought to have been more fully described. We want to know how far the occupiers depend upon their holdings for a livelihood, whether they live well and whether they persevere after their situation has lost the charm of novelty. Mr. Burrows, we notice, thinks that, with a co-operative system, six acres may well maintain an industrious man and his family. This seems to us a hard saying. What of land too poor or too remote from towns for the most lucrative forms of the *petite culture*? What of bad seasons and what of sudden falls in the price now of this, now of that, kind of farm produce? Can a six acre farm at best afford more than a very meagre livelihood embittered by perpetual anxiety? In Ireland indeed, where there is already a multitude of small farmers secure in their holdings and passionately attached to the soil, co-operative effort, especially in the direction of providing credit, may achieve the brilliant results foretold in Mr. Plunkett's paper. But the average Irish farm contains about thirty acres.

The proposals for settling the unemployed upon the land are worthy of careful consideration. Workhouse farms are good in so far as they provide wholesome employment and lessen the cost of relieving the poor. Labour colonies are better if they can be made to answer. But even here we doubt the possibility of a radical social reform. When we have trained the least efficient part of our people to agricultural work, what shall we do with them? We cannot find them places with the farmers who cannot find work for their best hands. If we help them to emigrate, our colonies are apt to shut the door in their face. If we set them up on little farms of their own, can we reasonably expect in the present state of agriculture that they will stick to their work or that their work will yield them a maintenance? It is right that every experiment should be tried, but it is only rational to ask ourselves what we hope for and how much we are likely to accomplish. This collection of papers may be said to raise more questions than it answers.

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