WILEY

Review

Author(s): T. E. Kebbel

Review by: T. E. Kebbel

Source: *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 66 (Jun., 1907), pp. 240-243

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Royal Economic Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2220670>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 03:54 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Wiley, Royal Economic Society are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Economic Journal*

is small. If it did, the policy of the Great Western Railway, for instance, during recent years should spell ruin for that company.

In spite of defects the book is a valuable contribution to railway economics, and, as it is thoroughly practical, it should appeal to railway men and students equally.

W. T. STEPHENSON

SMALL HOLDINGS.

1. *The Working of the Small Holdings Act. With Suggestions for its Amendment.* By L. JEBB. (London : Murray.)
2. *How Landlords can create Small Holdings. Some Examples.* By L. JEBB. (London : Murray.)
3. *Report of Departmental Committee on Small Holdings.* (Wyman and Sons, Fetter Lane, 1906.)

MISS JEBB begins with an inquiry into the working of the Small Holdings Act of 1892, which, it is generally admitted, has not borne all the fruit which its authors expected from it. Dealing with the evidence on which that Act was founded we come first to the vexed question of ownership *v.* tenancy. The local authorities are generally in favour of the former, the great majority of the peasantry are in favour of the latter. In fact, in making my own inquiries I only found one county, namely, Westmorland, in which the labourers preferred to purchase. The local authorities, whether county council or parish council, do not wish to be burdened with the cares and responsibilities of a landlord, or the chance of finding themselves left with empty farms upon their hands. The peasantry don't like to be tied down to any given spot : or to be unable to get rid of their land readily, except by selling it at a heavy loss after its value has been depreciated. They object, moreover, to the deposit required from a purchaser, as they want all their ready money for immediate purposes. We understand the objection of the local authorities, but we should say nevertheless that from a public point of view the hiring system was decidedly preferable, for it would avoid the risk of creating a class of hereditary squatters whose condition, where they still exist, should be a caution to enthusiasts. In almost every English village the worst cottages are those inhabited by the owners.

Miss Jebb gives in to the popular idea that sufficient land

cannot be acquired for small holdings without the extension of compulsory powers to the local authorities. It may perhaps be found necessary to confer such powers, but not upon the county or parish council. The committee very truly report that the central authority, *i.e.*, the Board of Agriculture, is the only body fit to be entrusted with such powers, or which would be "unlikely to use them in an arbitrary manner." The county council in the exercise of such authority would, it has been pointed out, often be waging war on their own friends, neighbours, and tenants. The parish council might be animated by personal feelings of a directly opposite character. For all reasons it is better that compulsion, if compulsion there must be, should be in the hands of a body above all local jealousies or partialities, a point which Miss Jebb does not seem to have considered.

As to the demand for and the supply of small holdings, it is difficult to get at the exact truth. The evidence given by Lord Carrington's own land agent, Mr. Jonas, before the Departmental Committee is extremely valuable. "The small holders are men who, having made the cultivation of allotments successful, have been given land enough to make a small holding. . . . Success is probable on a variety of soil, and under a variety of conditions where special care is taken to select the right kind of men to work the land in the manner best suited to it, and unless the man is known to be skilful in the cultivation of the land and the sale of its produce, a period of probation in the working of an allotment or otherwise is advisable as a test." This has long been obvious to those who have studied the subject. Twenty years ago we find in Mr. Kebbel's "Agricultural Labourer" exactly the same suggestion representing the allotment system as a training school for peasant farmers. Mr. Jonas goes on to say that "Small holdings, to be economically successful, must originate in a genuine demand for them by really suitable tenants" (Report, pp. 20, 21).

Has Miss Jebb made a point of inquiring whether there is any difficulty in finding land available for such men as these? Because it all turns on that—there is abundant evidence to show, had we space to produce it, the almost certain failure of small holdings farmed in neglect of these precautions. If we confine our attention to the class of applicants who are known to be competent men, and put out of consideration "the large number of manifestly unfit men" who give so much trouble to those engaged in the business of letting small holdings, shall we

not have reason to believe that the difficulty of procuring land for this purpose has been vastly exaggerated? When a pupil destined for the law once complained to Mark Pattison that the Bar was overstocked. "Yes," said Pattison, "but not with able men." It is the rejected applicants who would be ruined by compliance with their demands who go about talking of the "blank denial."

Small holdings are suitable only for two classes of men. The exceptionally industrious, skilful, and self-denying labourer who, by the exercise of those virtues which ensure success in most of the occupations of life, has saved capital enough by his own exertions to enter on a small farm with some prospect of success, and what is more, has shown himself possessed of those qualities which can alone enable him to make it answer. For these men small farms cannot be too freely provided. The other class who make them pay are those who combine with the occupation of land some other trade or calling. The village shopkeeper, butcher, publican, or blacksmith, the market-gardener, or the poultry breeder, will always be the better for a few acres of land, and will usually do full justice to them. Miss Jebb recognises this distinction: but it requires to be more strongly emphasised: it is only our appreciation of its importance which can enable us to combat the erroneous assertion that enough land cannot be got for small holdings without compulsion. Enough land can always be found for *fit* men: and the less that is found for unfit men the better.

Miss Jebb's pamphlet on "How Small Holdings can be Created" agrees in the main with the Report of the Commission. We are of opinion that it would be far better for the landholders of this country to take the whole business into their own hands. If on every estate of 5,000 acres two or three large farms were set aside as they became vacant for conversion into peasant holdings, the end might possibly be gained without either injury to existing tenants, or pecuniary loss to the landlords. Miss Jebb has evidence to show not only that higher rents can be obtained from the smaller tenants, but that these rents are punctually paid. Lord Harrowby's testimony (pp. 54-57), is of great practical interest. He shows, by his own personal experience, that it is possible for landowners to "create small holdings of ten acres or upwards on an economic basis with borrowed money because the higher rent to be obtained from small holdings will more than pay the interest on the loan." But here it is necessary to point out that, according to other witnesses, it is just this higher rent which

breaks the back of the small holder, and makes him a failure instead of a success. If the ordinary agricultural rent of the district represents the market value of the land, it is fair to ask how the small holder, by the terms of our argument a poor man, can afford to pay more. It is perfectly true that, for the sake of getting "a bit o' land," the labouring man very often will be ready to offer anything. But it cannot be right to encourage him unless there are reasons for doing so not inconsistent with economic principles. This is a problem which Miss Jebb has omitted to explain. The question, moreover, is complicated by the fact that many of Lord Harrowby's small holders do "combine their work on the land with other employment," the very class of men for whom small holdings are universally allowed to be suitable, and whose fitness for them requires no proof.

If the system of small holdings is to be adopted on the scale demanded by our advanced agrarian reformers it is quite clear that it cannot be restricted to exceptionally qualified men: it must be something of which the average agricultural peasant is able to avail himself. It is equally certain that he will never bring sufficient capital into the business to insure himself in the long run against inevitable losses: bad seasons, loss of stock, and other accidents, to which both tillage and pasturage are alike liable.

Miss Jebb and the Committee are agreed on one point, and that is that the best solution of the whole difficulty is to be found in the willing co-operation of the territorial classes, who possess that first of all requisites, a knowledge of the subject, and are able to distinguish between competent and incompetent applicants, a task by which municipal authorities are greatly perplexed. "There is no doubt," says Miss Jebb, "that if the landowning class were to make this a more special subject for their consideration, many of the evils which are sometimes feared from schemes promoted under legislative action would be averted." We are firmly convinced that whether an extended system of small holdings shall turn out to be a blessing or a curse entirely depends on the character of those who conduct it, and on the object for which it is promoted. If it is made a political question, an excuse for the gratification of class jealousies, farewell to all hopes of its success.

T. E. KEBBEL