

SPADE AND ROOD

AMONG the many shibboleths which satisfy the 'practical men' who utter them and exasperate the 'visionaries' who hanker after reality, not a few are connected with the land. 'The stately homes of England,' 'the playing-fields of Eton,' 'our national sportsmanship,' are examples. 'England could never grow her own food' is another. With those chiefly concerned it is axiomatic that fox-hunting and large estates have made England what she is! They have certainly contributed to do so, and the result is, of course, highly satisfactory to—the speaker. 'We are at the present moment in Great Britain assisting at a third of these turning points in the history of generations, for we have just arrived at the time when only a few old people can still remember an England that was not urban, policed, and dependent upon mechanical and centralised communications. We have just entered upon the time when all *living memory* of the older agricultural England is passing away.'¹

If, remembering that 'there's livers out of Britain' and that Britain herself has changed exceedingly, we ask what is the verdict of tradition and experience, the answer is less reassuring. From the very ranks of the English landowners themselves comes a clear, vigorous contradiction of the dominant shibboleths. This is what Mr. Christopher Turnor, a practical agriculturalist, a conservative by conviction, an acknowledged authority, has to say of large farming:

'It is a fact capable of proof in every country of Europe that the subdivision of land or "the conversion" of large farms into small holdings has in every known case led to

¹ Belloc, *Lingard's Hist. Engl.*, Vol. XI (1915), p. 158.

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an increase in the human and animal population and greater productiveness.²

Latifundia have led and lead to the very opposite.³ Again, as to the national character of our farming, he declares without ceremony that 'We have seen what the disregard of the human and the national factors has done for our farming industry, as it is to-day. It is frankly anti-national. Its narrow commercial system of economics ensures that it earns a profit for the farmer' (but not for the nation).⁴

Le commercialisme, voilà l'ennemi. Vain, trebly vain are all schemes of social betterment, all pompous 'reconstructions' that propose no change of heart, such a change of heart as would soon make modern commercialism impossible. So long as profit, not service, is the watchword, and man, not God, the goal, we ask in vain for the re-entrance of beauty into the lives of our harassed people. To add house to house and field to field has resulted as the prophets of God foretold.

Now it is noteworthy that it was not until the change of religion that modern commercialism took root, when 'The fresh owners of the Church lands had introduced a commercial spirit into the English soil.'⁵

Let us hear another non-Catholic witness regarding the 'great' *Elizabethan age!*

'There is far more scope for the introduction of very small holdings or allotments, which the cultivators could work for a living, and not for the market. This system

² In *Nineteenth Century*, Sept., 1916, p. 560).

³ In the *Catholic Times* of July 29, 1922, Fr. Vincent McNabb, O.P., alludes to the economic superiority of small farming as a fact established by experience. Again, in *New Witness* of Sept. 8, 1922, he says: 'I know of a farm of five hundred acres, broken into small holdings, that is now worth five times its original value.'

⁴ In *Nineteenth Century*, Sept., 1916, p. 566.

⁵ Garnier, *Annals of the Peasantry*, p. 90, quoted in A. M. Ludovici, *A Defence of Aristocracy*, p. 59.

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was in vogue even for large estates all through the Middle Ages; it was only, so far as we see, in the Elizabethan era that farming came to be directed towards the market, and organized as a trade, since the cultivator aimed not at getting food, but at producing something he could sell.⁶

Mediaeval England was not indeed the paradise that some perfervid mediaevalists have imagined, but it was *almost* a paradise in comparison with Tudor and modern England, especially industrial England. The following testimony deserves to be well weighed and pondered.

'We have seen that the duties of the tenant were carefully defined, and the custom of the manor would ensure that encroachments on the part of the lord could be successfully resisted. With few wants, with the solace of wife and home, rude pleasures and occasional feasts, the position of the tenant of the Old English manor may well compare with that of his modern counterpart.'⁷

The authorship of the change is significant. Agriculture, it is no longer denied, had been fostered by the monks, who were also, as Disraeli proclaimed in his *Sybil*, by far the best and kindest of landlords. With the protecting monastery fell the free peasant. Some fellow, writing to Henry VIII from Ireland, urged the conquest of that country, *because*, with the hardy Irish clansmen for his soldiers, his Highness might conquer Europe and even hope to be proclaimed Emperor of Jerusalem!

'But the second Tudor was not exactly like that kind of king. The Defender of Faith and Pattern of Morals seemed always to have had an instinctive dread and suspicion of the peasant.

'Under the appellation of sturdy beggars, he and his daughter strung up many tens of thousands of them along the public highways of the kingdom. He

⁶ Dr. Cunningham in *Economic Review*, Dec., 1907 (italics mine).

⁷ N. Hone, *The English Manor and Manorial Records*, VI, 98 (1907).

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wanted spoils without the trouble of having to fight for them. It would be easier to rob the churches and monasteries at home than to bother about temples or tombs in Jerusalem, and besides he had too many domestic affairs of the Harem to attend to in Westminster to allow time to go crusading against the Turk in the East. It was Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth who between them ended the English peasant."⁸

Thus we see that, in England at all events, religion and peasantry went down together, and it must be clear to many that no less a power than a religion believed in will avail to restore English people to the land in mockery called theirs. It is well to point out, as Mr. Saxon Mills has done, that agriculture is the foundation of the state, but books and reasonings are of small avail against prepotent selfishness, sport-worship and prejudice.

The rebuilding of rural England is bound up with and dependent upon England's conversion, and would to God England had a host of monks to go forth into the wastes desolated by Shylock and Mammon!

'Machinery has come to stay' was deemed a knock-down argument before 1916, and even now is often heard, as in *Catholic Book Notes*, August, 1922, p. 112, in a review of Mr. Penty's *Post-Industrialism*. If so, we may retort, disease, degradation and hideousness have come to stay, and we may as well give up all hope of recovering a wise and beautiful social order, of recapturing national art and grace. It is no mere passion for the past, no mere aesthetic craving that prompts the abhorrence of machinery felt by not a few whose love of their fellows is beyond question; it is the well-founded conviction that machinery tends to degrade its human ministers both individually and socially.

⁸ Sir W. F. Butler, *The Light of the West*, 168.

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' Rest time came, and wiping the sweat from brow and blade we sought the welcome shadow of the hedge and the cool sweet oatmeal water with which the wise reaper quenches his thirst. Farmer Marler hastened off to see with master-eye that all went well elsewhere; the farm men slept tranquilly, stretched at full length, clasped hands for pillow; and old Dodden, sitting with crooked fingers interlaced to check their trembling betrayal of old age, told how in his youth he had "swep" a four-acre field single-handed in three days—an almost impossible feat—and of the first reaping-machine in these parts, and how it brought, to his thinking, the ruin of agricultural morals with it. "'Tis again nature," he said, "the Lard gave us the land an' the seed, but 'Ee said that a man should sweat. Where's the sweat drivin' round wi' two horses cutting the straw down and gatherin' it again, wi' scarce a hand's turn i' the day's work? "

' Old Dodden's high-pitched quavering voice rose and fell, mournful as he surveyed the present, vehement as he recorded the heroic past. He spoke of the rural exodus and shook his head mournfully. "We old 'uns were content wi' earth and the open sky like our feythers before us, but wi' the children 'tis first machines to save doin' a hand's turn o' honest work, an' then land an' sky ain't big enough seemin'ly, nor grand enough; it must be town an' a paved street, an' they sweat their lives out atwixt four walls an' call it seein' life—'tis death an' worse comes to the most of 'em.' "

' Machinery,' says Professor Lethaby, 'is no more real work than hand-organ noises are real music.'⁹ What mankind has lived and lived well without until yesterday cannot be described as necessary to his well-being. If it can be shown that, as a matter of experience, the mechanical innovations have been accompanied by evils far greater than their pretended advantages, the case against them may fairly be called a strong one. I believe that few persons at once disinterested and well informed, would deny, in 1922, that this case has been made out, although many would not admit the remedy.

⁹ Michael Fairless, *The Roadmender* (1913), 124-125.

¹⁰ *Form in Civilisation*, quoted in *The Crusader*, July 21, 1922.

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Not only is a small farm or holding a far better economic unit than a large one, not only should it be worked as Ruskin taught, by hand-labour, but further, our townbred reconstructors will be amazed to learn that the produce will be carried more cheaply and wisely by road than by rail, according to the opinion of one who speaks from experience :

‘For a small farm cultivated as a market garden to secure satisfactory results, the conditions that would have to be observed seem to be the following :

- (1) *The land must be within cartage distance of the market.* Produce sent by rail cannot compete in the market with that which comes by road. This is partly because of the superior freshness of the latter, and partly because of the extra cost of packing and transporting to and from the railway wagons, but mainly because the rail-carried produce is unable to get into the market sufficiently early to secure the best prices in comparison with road-borne produce. The latter is carted by night, and is available on the opening of the early markets.¹¹

Again, if it be true that ‘there is no Wealth but Life—Life including all its powers of love, of joy and of admiration,’ as Ruskin boldly declared (*Unto this Last*, iv, 77), and if it be true, as we know it is true, that the old methods of farming at least raised a finer human crop than any associated with steam-plough or self-binder, we may well ask whether the alleged advantages, such as they are, of machinery are worth the heavy price paid for their use.

‘Βέλτιστος δῆμος ὁ γεωργικὸς ἔστιν,’¹² said Aristotle. ‘They (soldiers of the physique of 1850) are gone as the buffalo are gone from the prairies, or the Red Man from the American continent. I sometimes think that if these men were bred amongst us to-day, there need have been no suffragettes.’¹³ For indeed, as a gifted

¹¹ Harold E. Moore, *Six Acres by Hand Labour* (1907), ch. 1, p. 14.

¹² *Polit.*, vi, 2, quoted by K. H. Digby, *Broad Stone of H., Orlandus* 89.

¹³ Sir Wm. Butler, *Autobiogr.*, ch. iii, p. 42.

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Catholic writer has well said, 'there is something almost sacramental in¹⁴ their work, for they are bringing their bit of earth nearer to the Creator's original intention for it, atoning to it and Him for the ban of thorns and thistles laid on it when its lord and master fell from grace in Eden.'¹⁵ *Qui laborat orat* is specially true of those who wring from the soil their livelihood in the sweat of their brow.

In my diary, October 22nd, 1917, I noted: 'It is perfectly true that for some purposes machinery has become indispensable. It would fare hard with the wounded—in the Balkans, for instance—if they had all to be taken by cart or barrow or stretcher to the hospital and dressing stations in such a war as the present. But this use, like munition-making, is but homœopathic: it is remedial of a machine-made and machine-conducted war.'

In practice the object of machinery is to enable the large owner to accumulate profits and eliminate paid labour. The pretext commonly given is that the labourer is 'saved' from drudgery. 'Hate not laborious works, nor husbandry ordained by the most High' said the inspired author of *Ecclesiasticus* (vii, 15), of which we may hear a faint pagan echo in Varro's 'Divina nature dedit agros, ars humana ædificavit urbes' (*Englische Studien*, vol. xxxii, p. 163), which may have suggested Cowley's 'God the first garden made, and the first city Cain,' more tersely summed in Cowper's 'God made the country and man made the town.' It may well be questioned whether it is well to be 'saved' from the labour that God has pronounced blessed.

The superiority of the news-reading office-clerk to the peasant was an article of faith in the nineteenth century. A century of industrialism has done its ut-

¹⁴ Pioneer settlers.

¹⁵ Mrs. Hugh Fraser, *Seven Years on the Pacific Slope*, iv, 75.

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most to scorch, wither and blacken England in the name of 'progress,' and now the land is out of cultivation while the people are out of employment, and at the eleventh hour or later the few who think begin to realise that

'When you destroy a blade of grass
You poison England at her roots;
Remember no man's foot can pass
Where evermore no green leaf shoots.

When the old hollow earth is crack'd,
And when, to grasp more power and feasts,
Its ores are emptied, wasted, lack'd,
The middens of your burning beasts

Shall be rak'd over till they yield
Last priceless slags for fashionings high,
Ploughs to wake grass in every field,
Chisels men's hands to magnify.'¹⁶

A great part of Christendom has been overrun by barbarians, the barbarians of usury and exploitation. It was the monks who restored agriculture and civilisation under the former barbarian deluge. A thing is found where it is lost. I suggest, then, that it is the monks who will once more reclaim the waste and gather communities of believing men under the shadow of minster towers and within the hearing of hallowed bells, exactly reversing the processes of the invasion, thus described by Mrs. Hugh Fraser: 'When they (the settlers) have worked hard and long enough, the civilisation which pushed them forth will eject them once more, and the railways and factories and the syndicates will throng in and start making money regardless of the rights of the men who cut the first roads and battled to clear the forest and convert the wilderness into a garden.'¹⁷

¹⁶ Gordon Bottomley, *To Iron Founders and Others*, in *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, 984-5.

¹⁷ *Seven Years on the Pacific Slope*, iv, 74.

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If England is to survive she must burn what she has adored and adore what she has burned. She must burn money-worship, respectability, Pharisaism and empire-building, and turn back to the spade and plough and the cross. Little did Herrick realise (we may believe) the depth of meaning that was in his *Old Wives Prayer* :

‘ Holy-rood, come forth and shield
Us i’ th’ Citie, and the Field :
Safely guard us, now and aye
From the blast that burns by day ;
And those sounds that us affright
In the dead of dampish night.
Drive all hurtfull Feinds us fro,
By the Time the Cocks first crow.’

Hesperides (1902), p. 171-2.

‘ Meanwhile the holy-rood hence fright
The foule fiend, and evill spright.’

Poems (1869), Vol. I, p. 130.

A century of industrialism, an army of unemployed, empire-building abroad and ‘cinema’-building at home, and the land a portion for foxes, pheasants, factories, airsheds and garages; and now with dramatic swiftness Ionia is overrun and laid waste and the Turkish special chivalry have put Smyrna to fire and sword. But what does it matter so long as we have game-preserving, hunting, sensational films, screaming headlines, journals of vast circulation with illustrations of half-clad women, empty granaries and full work-houses; briefly, all those advantages of ‘civilisation’ which we are so anxious to bestow upon those unenlightened ‘natives’ who happen to be living where gold or oil is available?

In one word, the only solving of England’s land problem and religious problem, and every other problem, is that given long ago to the chosen people :
‘ *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum.*’

H. E. G. ROPE.