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*Agriculture -
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WYE COLLEGE

FELLOWSHIP LECTURE

The Agrarian Revolution of the Past Hundred Years

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THE AGRARIAN REVOLUTION OF THE PAST HUNDRED YEARS—1846-1949

By C. S. ORWIN, Esq., M.A., D.Litt.

I suppose that the past hundred years have witnessed economic and social changes in the life of the nation unparalleled in any previous century or even in a thousand years. This is true no less of that section of the people who live by the land than it is of those engaged in any other of the nation's major activities. To-night, I want to think about these great changes, not so much in their influence on the technique of food production as in the effect which they have had, and which they may have in the future, on the lives of the men and women in the farming industry. Further, I want to consider what importance is to be attached to agriculture and the rural way of life in national economy. The scientific and technical advances even of the past generation have been so spectacular and their assimilation by the farming system has been so engrossing that there has not yet been time for objective consideration of all that they involve in the national set-up.

Dating the economic changes in the life of a nation is always difficult, but as a generalization it might be said that farming, which had proceeded almost unchanged for a millennium, first began to be shaken out of its old routine at the beginning of the eighteenth century. There had been a speeding-up in the pace of enclosure of open field; new crops brought over from the Continent were finding their way into cultivation; a new spirit of enquiry and adventure was becoming manifest in landlords and their tenants. These things combined to start a new era in farming and rural industry, the era of technical improvement. Lord Townsend, Sir Richard Weston, Sir Thomas Gresley, and Thomas William Coke amongst landowners, with Jethro Tull, Robert Bakewell, Robert Fowler, the brothers Culley and Colling amongst farmers, are names that have come down to us amongst a host of lesser agricultural improvers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The government of the country was still in the hands of the landed aristocracy, and

whether Whig or Tory mattered little, for each placed the landed interest first in national affairs.

In practice, this priority meant the protection of agricultural rents and farming profits, by import duties on corn. But, from the middle of the eighteenth century the numbers of the new manufacturing class were continually growing, and soon the preponderance of the nation had shifted permanently. At the same time, the great majority of the open-field farmers, the small freeholders and tenants of a few strips, had become farm workers under enclosure, whose real wages rose and fell inversely with the prices of corn. So began the great struggle for the repeal of the Corn Laws, supported by the leaders of industry, who wanted to keep down wages and manufacturing costs, by the wage workers, urban and rural, whose standards of living were very low, and by the humanitarians who were shocked at their condition. Repeal was opposed by the landowners and farmers, a small class in the community but politically powerful. The struggle was won in 1846, when legislation was enacted which led to the abolition of the duties on corn. The view was strongly held, at this time, that every prosperous nation must rely for its food upon its own resources, and must meet the growth of numbers with corresponding increases in production. In spite of all fears to the contrary, British farming was able to accomplish this, and for the next thirty years the homeland met nearly all the claims made upon it by the growing industrial population.

The policy of the State was to do everything that it could to assist in this essential work, without infringing the principle of free trade. In the generation following the repeal of the Corn Laws, farming was being carried on under the stimulus of an ever-increasing demand. The landlord and tenant system prevailed over more than 90 per cent. of the country, and there was need for a great investment of capital by the landlords for the re-equipment of the land. New buildings, new cottages were wanted, and great areas of land awaited improvement by the new methods of drainage and reclamation. The tradition of leadership handed down from the pioneering days of the previous century was not dead amongst landowners, who had also the incentive of personal gain from any improvements which they might effect. Many of them, however, were not free to spend capital on their agricultural property, being held in bondage by the terms of the family settlements under which they inherited their land. Since the seventeenth century, it had been customary for landowning families to "settle" their estates, that is, to name those to whom they were to pass on death.

Property would be bequeathed to the eldest son, and then to his eldest son, the object being to preserve the family and its wealth by making it impossible for an heir to dissipate it. Trustees of the settlement were appointed to see that its conditions were observed, and by the practice of re-settlement from time to time, with the consent of the last heir, the system was perpetuated. In effect, the tenant-for-life enjoyed the income of the estate, but could not touch the capital. He was unable to sell, unable to grant leases extending beyond his own life, and unable to borrow money on the security of the estate. This imposed a real handicap on the improving landlord. Many of the improvements necessary for the development of the estate were long-term improvements, the cost of which any prudent landlord would be justified in charging upon the estate. Under the terms of settlements, however, a man succeeding, say, in middle life, would have to choose between leaving the property unimproved, with production running, consequently, perhaps at half-speed, or finding the money for it from his own resources, knowing full well that he was unlikely to live long enough to recover his outlay in the additional rents which the improvements would eventually bring in.

A large part of the country was affected by these settlements. The theme recurs constantly in many Victorian novels. Trollope's old Squire in *Can You Forgive Her?*, speaking of his spendthrift grandson, says, "He shall have the estate for his life; I don't think I have a right to leave it away from him. It never has been left away from the heir. But I'll tie it up so that he shan't cut a tree on it." The handicaps which settlements imposed were relieved, sometimes, by private Acts of Parliament, of which some 700 were passed during the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1856, a Settled Estates Act was passed, to alleviate the position generally, but it was so much hedged about by safeguards that it seldom operated. Later Acts, however, were more effective in freeing the improving landlords from the restraints of the dead hand, and Parliament, about the same time, voted money for State loans for purposes of land drainage and reclamation. These loans were to be secured by first charges upon the settled estates, and when the Government funds were exhausted, Lands Improvement Companies were incorporated to advance money upon the same security and with the same objects, as well as for the erection of farm houses and cottages.

Landowners still took responsibility for the system of farming. Through the covenants in the contracts of tenancy, matters such as

the course of cropping to be followed, the system of cultivation, the disposal of the produce of the farm, the responsibility of the tenant for repairs and maintenance, these and other matters representing the accepted standards of the day for what constituted good farming, were clearly defined and they were rigidly enforced.

Thus, the more progressive amongst landowners were busy during the middle of the last century in re-equipping their estates for high farming, with results which are still visible, particularly in districts mainly arable, the regions of the larger farms. Their tenants, working for a sellers' market which lasted for a generation, were equally progressive, and needed no other assistance to a sustained effort. It was the country's greatest farming epoch; standards of estate management and farming have never been so high, and the same is true of the standards of living of squires and farmers. Only for the agricultural labourer had the Golden Age of English farming nothing to offer; he lived and worked under conditions which led him, often, to welcome, as an alternative, life in an industrial slum with the hope that a statute might limit his working day, some time, to no more than ten hours.

The great agricultural depression which broke so suddenly upon the country towards the end of the 1870s, was the cumulative result of three bad harvests, serious outbreaks of disease in sheep and cattle, and great increases in corn imports from North America. Unprotected by tariffs, corn prices crumbled, and the price-fall, which meant cheap food, low production costs and high profits for the manufacturing interest, was a first-class disaster to the landed interest. A fall in rents of some 50 per cent. in a few years, wiped out half the landowners' capital and deprived them of the surplus income needed for estate improvements and maintenance. As you go about the country, how often do you see a new farm building, let alone a new homestead? Almost the whole equipment of agriculture, to-day, represents the provision made for it not less than 60 years ago, when England was still a great corn-growing country. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, landlords received a blow from which they have never recovered. The heart, as well as the money, had gone out of the business. When agricultural land once again became marketable (after the first World War), they began to sell out, and the proportion of land held on the landlord-and-tenant system, which was about 95 per cent. a hundred years ago, has fallen, to-day, to about 60 per cent.

Farmers in fully one-half of the country, the eastern, arable-farming part, were called upon to devise a new technique of farming

if they were to survive. Many were unable to do it and went out of business; the rest survived by abandoning much of their corn-growing and letting their ploughlands go down to grass, substituting stock farming or dairying, and reducing labour staffs.

Farm workers were the only one of the three partners in agriculture who did not suffer financial loss, for there was no room for declines in wage rates; in fact, real wages improved as prices fell. But there was a heavy decline in employment not only in farming but also in the rural industries associated with it, as land went out of cultivation. Joseph Arch's Agricultural Labourers' Union, which had been very active just before the depression, now applied itself to the promotion of migration of rural workers into urban industries and to emigration overseas.

In a few years the rural scene had undergone a transformation, and, almost exclusively, it was the work of the farmers. Landlords were at the end of their resources when they had reduced or remitted rents. It was left to their tenants to work out the new systems of farming needed to meet the new circumstances of the industry. This change in leadership and control was quickly recognized, and the State, which since the repeal of the Corn Laws had been concerned mainly to help the landowner as the pre-dominant partner, was now prepared to recognize the increasing responsibilities of his tenant and to assist him to realize them. Thus were enacted the series of Acts of Parliament, beginning with the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1875 and ending with that of last year, 1948. Between these years something like a dozen major Acts have been passed, and nearly all of them have done something to enhance the status of the farmer. The first two Acts, 1875 and 1883, imposed on the landlord the obligation of compensating the good farmer, on quitting the holding, for the improvements which he left behind him. Later ones released the tenant from many of the restrictive covenants, now obsolete, in his contract of tenancy. He could farm as he liked and sell what he liked, as long as he kept his farm clean and in good heart. He was given security of tenure, and notices to quit for any reason except bad farming, which had to be proved, were rendered null and void. In the result, a condition virtually of dual ownership by landlord and tenant has been established, in which the tenant is the arbiter in the use of the land.

Thus, in sixty years, there was a complete reversal of the relations of landlord and tenant in the agricultural partnership. Recently, however, a situation foreshadowed after the first World

War has developed the responsibility for land use a stage further. Home food production has assumed a new importance as one of the economic consequences of the two World Wars. In 1846, the protective cover of the Corn Laws could be thrown off without endangering the nation's food supplies. In 1880, and onwards, the growing volume of imported food paid for by industrial exports seemed to put scarcity outside the limits of probability. Peace and Plenty had been the nation's watchwords, and the impact of the Boer War, the first military adventure of any magnitude for nearly fifty years, was not enough to raise a doubt in the minds of the majority of the people that Peace and Plenty would continue to bless the country. During the first World War, however, in 1917, it had become clear that the chances of a blockade of Britain must still be reckoned with, and by post-war legislation through the Agriculture Act of 1920, the State intervened again to take a hand in the direction of agriculture. This time, however, it was not to be only by the guarantee of fair prices to induce landlords and farmers to do their jobs, but also by taking powers to dispossess members of either class who failed in their responsibilities. Though this Act was repealed in the following year, the principle contained in it, that good farming for maximum production was the concern of the whole community and could not be left to the judgment of individuals, has been re-enacted in the Acts of 1947 and 1948.

One of the outstanding features of agricultural development in the present century has been the organization of the farmers in the National Farmers' Union. Begun as an association of Lincolnshire farmers in 1908, it spread rapidly throughout the country, and to-day its membership includes the greater number of those who derive their living from the occupation of land. It is essentially a political organization, a trade union, concerned to promote the current interests of its members rather than to develop the farming industry. But as the undisputed spokesman of the farmers of the country, it has established the closest contact with the departments of agriculture and food, and the opinion of the Union, always sought when legislation or administrative action is in question, carries very great weight in official circles.

The usefulness of such an organization fully representative of the farmers of the country, was manifest when the second agricultural depression of the past hundred years overtook the industry. This occurred when the inflated prices of the period of the first World War collapsed within three years of the Armistice, and, after a few indeterminate years, an economic depression developed all over the

world. In Britain, it is true to say, probably, that by 1930 the profit margin on most farm products had dwindled to nothing. Prolonged negotiations between the Government and the National Farmers' Union led to State relief in various forms—by marketing organization, by the control of imports, the restriction of home production, and finally by straight tariffs. Thus, the ten years preceding the second World War witnessed a complete reversal of the policy of free trade in food which the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 had heralded, and which every Government since that time had accepted without question.

State intervention during the second half of the hundred years now under consideration, was exercised not only on behalf of the farmer. All through the nineteenth century, the position of the farm worker remained a reproach to the industry and to the nation. Under the leadership of Joseph Arch, a valiant attempt at self-help had been made in the 1870s and early 1880s, and it achieved lasting results. In their main purpose, however, the raising of wages and the reduction of hours, the Unions had failed, beaten, first of all, by the weight of unorganized casual labour which drifted about between town and country, and, secondly, by the great agricultural depression of the time, and the declining demand for labour. But public attention had been attracted to the poor condition of agricultural workers throughout the country, and it was due, mostly, to the work of the Unions that the parliamentary franchise was granted to them in 1885.

Politicians of both parties subscribed to the idea that farm workers could best be helped by giving them access to land, that by making allotments and small holdings available to them, the more deserving of them would be able to set their feet upon the lower rungs of the economic ladder. It was an old idea. It had been tried in 1811 as a measure of Poor Relief, and Mr. Jesse Collings' campaign in the 1880s to give agricultural workers "three acres and a cow", culminated in the first Small Holdings Act, passed in 1892, to empower County Councils to buy land for this purpose. Like so much of the more progressive legislation of our country, this Act, the first, was only permissive, but later Acts required action by the counties, and considerable estates have been purchased, and equipped and settled by them. Judged by its results, however, land settlement could not be said to have touched even the fringe of the problem, and it was not until 1917, when wages and conditions of employment were taken out of the hands of the employers and put under the control of an independent tribunal, the Agricultural

Wages Board, that the economic position of the farm worker reached, ultimately, a parity with that of other wage workers.

The position of agricultural labour, to-day, is surely unique. It was inevitable, no doubt, that employment should have declined during the thirty years of the great agricultural depression, and, in fact, the farming population was reduced by nearly 20 per cent. During the past ten years, however, farming has again been a rapidly expanding industry, with a need for maximum production at least as pressing as that in the '60s of the last century, but the decline in the demand for labour has continued unabated. The explanation is, of course, that the intensification of production through the great expansion of corn and potato growing has been achieved by the use of more machinery rather than by more manual labour. Nor can there be any doubt that this tendency will persist, and that employment in agriculture, if not roughly stabilized already, is more likely to fall than to rise.

Let us see, now, what this retrospect of a hundred years of English farming has shown us. We have seen how, at the beginning of it, farming was carried on, nearly everywhere, by two parties, the landowner and the tenant farmer, and the landlord, as the senior partner, dictated the farming system; how the demand for more and more home production to feed the growing industrial population sufficed to set off, for fully a generation, any adverse effect upon prices which might have been expected from the repeal of the Corn Laws.

We have seen how the opening up of the New World and the development of transport and export trade led to the agricultural depression, which dealt a death-blow to leadership by the landlord; how, in consequence, his mantle fell upon the farmer, and how, during the next forty years, the State, by progressive legislation, freed the tenant farmer from landlord control and established him as the arbiter of good farming.

We have seen how the State intervened to alleviate the lot of the farm worker, first, by successive attempts to help him to climb out of his position of wage worker, by the ladder of allotments and small holdings; and later, by the method, more realistic, of an Agricultural Wages Board. We have seen, too, how the progressive mechanization of the farming industry is tending to reduce rather than to increase the demand for labour.

We have seen how the economic consequences of a world war culminated, some twenty years ago, in a second acute agricultural

depression, countered, this time, by the State, by a return to a full measure of protection and the end of free trade in food.

Last of all, we have seen how the urgent need for higher production from the land, both in war and in peace, has led the State to assume many of the functions of leadership and control, once the prerogative of the landlord and then delegated to the farmer. Not, of course, by attempting "farming from Whitehall", but by the appointment of county committees of technical experts to whom the policy of the State is communicated, and whose duty then, as agents of the State, is to see that it is carried out.

The obvious lesson of the last hundred years of farming history, surely, is the rapidity, almost the violence, of the changes that it has experienced. A period during which the expansion of the industrial population and industrial enterprise depended almost entirely upon the capacity of British landlords and farmers to increase the food output of the land, was followed, with a suddenness which defied anticipation, by one during which the importance of the homeland in the food supply of the nation was said to have dropped to a level of producing enough for the week-end only. Next, a period of recovery during which the farmer learnt how to concentrate on the supply of those markets in which his produce enjoyed some natural advantage, to be followed by a hectic year or two, during the first World War, in which the nation faced starvation. Then another acute depression when this danger was passed and forgotten, and a return to protection of the industry more complete even than that given by the Corn Laws, as the need for maximum home production of food was once more forced upon the country.

But this is not all. During the same period of time, farming has evolved from a business carried on by traditional and rule-of-thumb methods, in which natural science counted for little and the farm worker was the cheapest machine, to one in every department of which—the management of the soil, the breeding and feeding of crops and stock, the control of pests and diseases—science is fundamental to practice, while the economical use of labour demands the maximum application of machinery to farm operations. In brief, a revolution calling for education, and education, and still more education. And what do we find? We find that 85 per cent. of our farms are holdings of 50 acres or less. Our farm boundaries were defined when the open fields were enclosed, before the days of Lawes and Gilbert, and McCormick and Ford, and farming progress, to-day, is controlled largely by this tyranny of an obsolete farm layout. Its small-scale organization has nothing to

offer either to ability or to enterprise, and so we spend millions on a National Agricultural Advisory Service as a second-best to the higher education of farmers, and we organize machinery gangs to perform, at high cost, mechanical cultivation for which the small farm cannot provide. All around us we can see land farmed far below the standard of the best, and some of it hardly farmed at all.

I want to suggest that here are some problems of national agriculture which are calling urgently for consideration. I know how important and absorbing are the technical studies which occupy your time—the management of livestock, the applications of machinery, the properties and uses of fertilizers and feeding-stuffs, the control of pests and diseases, etc. But I want you to sit back, sometimes, from these engrossing subjects, so that you may look at the farming business as a whole, and try to understand how it is organized for the production and distribution of food and the use of labour. Are you satisfied that the time-old organization still in operation, to-day, is giving the greatest possible service to the nation and the fullest opportunity to those whose lives are controlled by it? Farming is the only one of the nation's greater industries and professions which is closed to men with ability and experience, even of a high order, unless these qualities are backed by capital for investment. Without this, it offers no scope for management, no advancement for labour, and thus will it continue so long as the units of production, the farms, represent the engineering industry, say, at the stage of the village blacksmith's shop, or the textile industry when it was carried on with the spinning wheel and the hand loom. May I conclude by quoting some words of the first Principal of Wye College, spoken towards the end of a life devoted to the study of the land and its problems :

“ The structure of our farming has become antiquated until it can no longer take advantage of the new powers at our disposal . . . Let us not suppose that this structure, or our present land system, is immutable ; history shows us how it has moved from a sort of communal farming into the several ownerships that we may call peasant or yeoman farming, which in its turn passed into the larger tenant farming units that are proving inadequate to-day. Each of these systems answered in its day, each decayed under economic pressure and was transformed in response to new requirements from the community at large . . . Change must come ; it will be decay if we attempt to stabilize the system. We must be prepared for big changes in the social structure if our

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agriculture is to be restored to the place it could occupy in the national economy, if indeed many elements of our population are to be properly fed."*

Think, sometimes, of this aspect of rural life and labour, and how, even in spite of the spectacular changes of recent years, the burden of tradition lies heavy upon them.

* Hall, Sir A. Daniel, *Agricultural Progress and Agricultural Depression* during the last Sixty Years. The 21st Earl Grey Memorial Lecture, delivered at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1939.

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