

THE TENURE OF AGRICULTURAL LAND

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*Our heavenly Father hath not judged it right
To leave the road of agriculture light:
'Twas he who first made husbandry a plan,
And care a whetstone for the wit of man;
Nor suffers he his own domains to lie
Asleep in cumbrous old-world lethargy.*

Georgics, l. 140-145
tr. R. D. BLACKMORE

P R E F A C E

THE RT HON. EDWARD WOOD, M.P., spoke on 9 December, 1924, as follows:

"As I conceive it, at the present time, taking a view of British agriculture that is not confined to this year, or to next year, there is something like a silent revolution in progress within its borders. We are, unless I mistake, witnessing in England the gradual disappearance of the old landowning class. Within the last five years the number of occupying owners has almost exactly doubled, and at the present time those occupying owners hold something like 25 per cent. of the total area under crops and grass. For my part, I am very glad to see the principle of ownership extended, because I think that it is the sheet anchor of the country. But we ought not to shut our eyes to the fact that, as that process goes on, it is raising a problem that is likely to become increasingly acute, and that is the problem of finding the maintenance capital of the land as apart from the current working capital. Any of us who are accustomed to live in the country, who watch this process going on, see to-day a deterioration in what I may call the capital equipment of the land and the soil, whether in building or in drainage. I could go on indefinitely through the category in which we see that process at work....The real truth of the matter is that the old landowner did supply the essential capital equipment of the land at a most astonishingly cheap rate of interest. If that class, by taxation or for one reason or another, is gradually disappearing, what is going to happen?...The new owners who survive will find their

position increasingly difficult—and many a new occupying owner who has, in many cases, sunk too much of his capital on that side of the business, has left himself inadequate capital with which to run his ordinary working business. That means either that the soil is going to be starved and is gradually going to lose some of its fecundity by the land becoming waterlogged and so on; or the nation is going to say: 'We cannot watch this process going on,' and the State will come in to fill the function of the old landlord by lending capital. When it does that you may depend upon it that it will claim some measure of control in the business that it finances, and so you may well find yourselves in the course of the next thirty or forty years within measurable distance of something like nationalisation by a side wind."

The proposals for the reconstruction of land tenure contained in the following pages relate only to rural England. In effect they may be found to contain little of novelty; even before the days of Mill and of Henry George individuals and groups of persons have not been wanting who have advocated the abolition of private property in land. Most of them have been identified closely with the more revolutionary elements of the most advanced political party, and inevitably their proposals have been launched on a sea of prejudice which has prevented them from reaching a haven of calm consideration; some, indeed, have never merited any such consideration of their views by reason of their frankly confiscatory nature, which is never likely to make any appeal to the public conscience. Since the breakdown of Mr Lloyd George's Land Valuation less has been heard of the need for land reform upon such

lines, but the recent election has shown that there are still those who think that a prosperous countryside can arise only from the ashes of the landlord's home and from "the destruction of the last vestiges of feudalism" whatever this phrase may mean.

The authors have no political ends to serve; they know that under the system of tenure which these reformers are so ready to condemn England has attained to a standard of efficiency in farming which has been an example to the world; they have seen so much of the advantages to many a rural community of the leadership of a benevolent despot as to enable them to assess at its true value much of the criticism that is levelled against him. But the old order, with all its merits, is giving place to new. The transfer of land was immensely stimulated by the Finance Act (1909-10), 1910, and continued to gain impetus until the slump in values consequent on the deflation policy following the conclusion of Peace. There are again signs of increasing activity in the land-market; once more the land-speculator is raising his ugly head, and with the probability of some five years of stable government under an administration not avowedly hostile to the landlord, coupled with the uncertainty of the position thereafter, it seems reasonable to suppose that the break-up of the old estates will proceed at a greater and a greater rate.

In these circumstances it behoves everyone who has the interests of rural life and labour at heart to think whether there is no alternative to the policy of drift,

and to give unbiassed consideration to any serious counter proposals. Amongst these the question of State ownership of land (which has nothing whatever to do with State control of agriculture) comes foremost to the mind, and in the following pages the attempt is made to give it dispassionate consideration as a great economic problem having no necessary connection with the aims and objects of any one of the political parties of the State.

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