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AGRICULTURAL ECON

Go East for a Farm

A STUDY OF
RURAL MIGRATION

E. LORRAIN SMITH

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NOTE

IT is common knowledge that in certain parts of England the indigenous farming stock has experienced considerable dilution by the influx of settlers from other parts. The movement is connected in people's minds usually with the migration of Scottish farmers into Essex, and, to a lesser extent, into other of the south-eastern counties, during the great agricultural depression which set in with the 'eighties of last century. Those whose memories carry them back to that time will recall the appearance, in considerable numbers, of applicants from over the Border for farms, vacant and sometimes derelict, situated mainly on the heavy soils traditionally given up to corn-growing, and rendered unprofitable under the progressive decline in prices which wrought such havoc in all the arable farming districts.

It is known, too, though less commonly, that there was a similar movement at that time of farmers coming, most of them, from the south-western counties into the south-midland, southern, and south-eastern counties of England. These migrants, however, had names and used a speech less strange than those of the men from over the Border, and so they were more quickly assimilated by the districts of their adoption. In fact, many farmers who pass to-day in certain regions as representative of the old local yeomen families are, in truth, removed by no more than one generation from long lines of Somerset or Devon ancestors. In some of the predominantly arable farming localities, the farming population of the nineteenth century underwent a hundred per cent. change in its personnel during the last two decades, as any one can prove by reference to local directories.

The study of all these migratory movements, which has been summarized in the pages that follow, makes it quite clear that they were unknown in the self-sufficient days of English farming; they are associated, definitely, with the organization of farming for profit, and with those parts of England in which this was carried to its furthest extent. The 'fifties, 'sixties, and 'seventies of last century witnessed the climax of the prosperity of arable farmers

in England. The great demand for food from an ever-increasing industrial population, coupled with progress in the application of science to the business of food production, gave a stimulus to plough-farming such as it has never had, before or since, and over the eastern half of England the organization of mixed farming, founded on corn-growing on a capitalist basis, was pretty well complete. The self-sufficient farmer of the peasant type had largely disappeared. Corn-growing for the market was not for him; to be effective, it called for large-scale operations by capitalist employers of hired labour.

The profits of the system were large, and for a full generation life for the farmers concerned was good. That the system failed when opposed to the flood of prairie-grown corn and falling prices is a matter of history. This study shows that its collapse was the opportunity of some amongst the smaller farmers of the other half of Britain, who resembled rather the peasant type, and who depended more on thew and sinew than on command of capital. Some of them began to move away from their congested valleys, where live-stock farming, more profitable than corn-growing, predominated, and where the lack of alternative occupations tended to produce a land hunger. They turned, naturally, to the regions of capitalist corn-growing, where rents were tumbling as fast as prices, making the land look cheap to these frugal, hard-working farmers from the west of Scotland, from the Welsh marches, and from the south-western corner of England.

The migration which began then has never since ceased, and, as the author's title suggests, it has always been one way; there is no return. In times of agricultural depression the movement flares up, to subside again when times are better, but it has never stopped. The displacement of the capitalist and his hired workers by the working farmer and his sons is always going on. Not all of them, of course, are migrants, for coupled with the movement from outside there is a continual insurgence of local family-farmers, and even of farm labourers, into the ranks of capitalist organization.

In short, it is the circumstances of their lives, the personal participation of the farmers and their families in all the hard manual work of farming, rather than anything about the locality in which

they have their origin that explains this migration. Such a class does not exist in sufficient numbers in the districts most affected by recurrent periods of depression, and it is this which has led to the movement rather than to any superiority of technical skill or character in the small farmers of the west as contrasted with those of the east. But allowance must be made, of course, for the fact that their systems of farming, based rather on live stock than on corn, stood up better when the agricultural index number began to fall.

What is the conclusion to be drawn? Is there something inherent in farming to mark it out from all other national industries as being incapable of permanent large-scale organization? Have the joint-stock principle, the use of labour-aiding machinery, and the application of scientific management no place in agriculture? Must farming remain a peasant industry? Or is it that the attempts at large-scale operations have never been carried far enough in agriculture, where even to-day there is still no opening for the man with brains, energy, and technical knowledge unless these are supported by capital to invest in the business?

The investigation of the migration of farmers embodied in the following report was the work of Mr. E. Lorrain Smith, M.A. Edin., and was undertaken by him with the aid of a Research Scholarship in Agricultural Economics awarded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in the year 1929. A fuller account of the survey, embodying the statistical evidence, was presented as a thesis for the research degree of B.Litt. in the University of Oxford, and it was awarded the Research Medal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England in 1931. Most of the work had to be carried out by personal inquiry in the districts from and to which the migrations have taken place, and its success is due to the collaboration of farmers, National Farmers' Union officials, County Agricultural staffs, the Agricultural Organizers attached to the Edinburgh and East of Scotland Agricultural College, and other country dwellers, who alone could supply the essential information. The thanks of the Agricultural Economics Research Institute are offered very cordially to them all.

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C. S. ORWIN,
Director.

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