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AGRICULTURE'S BLACK YEARS AND GOLDEN AGE

In a recent pamphlet, *British Farming and Food**, George Winder presents facts and figures that badly need ventilating if the public is to have adequate opportunity of comparing the relative advantages of free, unprivileged farming and the system of protected and regimented agriculture now established by law. As this system enjoys the support of official propaganda as well as both the great political organizations the case for freedom is in danger of being overlooked.

Briefly, Mr. Winder's argument is that "Free Trade, far from ushering in a period of depression for the farmer, introduced the golden age of British agriculture." To-day, more than ever, British farming depends upon cheap imported feeding stuffs. A free agricultural economy, in addition to providing cheap food, would preserve fertility (an important strategical consideration of case of war) and produce more food-value per acre than is produced by the present subsidies and restrictions with their rewards and disciplines. These means are designed to maintain and extend the system of mixed farming which technical progress has rendered obsolete.

Up to about 1800, says Mr. Winder, mixed farming, with each holding virtually self-sufficient, was adequate to feed the population. But population increased after 1815, and the landowners' efforts to preserve high rents by excluding foreign corn resulted in hardship so acute that people listened to Free Trade arguments. After 1850 when trade had been almost liberated, the newly won freedom furnished such expanding markets for farm produce that British farmers even under mixed farming and against foreign competition enjoyed great prosperity. About 1880, however, the wheat grown cheaply on the wide expanses overseas began to reach Great Britain in ever-increasing quantities. Some British farmers by transferring their efforts to stock-raising turned this to their advantage, but according to Mr. Winder, owing to rooted obstinacy many persisted in mixed farming and suffered in consequence. With the application of the internal combustion engine to wheat growing in the Dominions after World War I, wheat production in Great Britain, unable to compete except in a very small area of exceptionally suitable land in East Anglia, became so unprofitable that it was widely abandoned. Hence the officially propagated legend of the "Black Years of neglected agriculture" between the wars. In fact, as Mr. Winder shows by statistics as well as by recorded

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instances, British farmers by turning increasingly to stock raising profited by this flood of cheap grain. By the system of ley farming, made economic by ploughing with tractors, specialist farmers were able to produce live-stock products more cheaply than before. Free Trade to-day would therefore bring prosperity to farmers as a whole as well as to the 93 per cent of the population not engaged in agriculture; for the resulting decrease in the cost of living would have far-reaching effects upon all other costs of production.

Confusion in the public mind on the subject of agriculture has been aggravated by the consequences of blockade during two world wars. Enemy submarines and air-raids tended to reverse farming conditions to those of 1800. Special interests were thus established and in the post-war years they have been protected by Government restrictions having similar effect to enemy action, namely, scarce and dear food.

Protectionists and protagonists of the "planned" economy, deceived by the illusion of a world shortage of food and exchange, have diverted attention from the real cause of scarcity. Mr. Winder provides up-to-date facts and statistics to refute their fallacies. He points out that despite recent relaxation of secondary controls, Treasury control of exchange, on which other exchanges depend, remains as absolute as before. Various considerations affect the allocation of foreign exchange; for instance, it is significant that the volume of tobacco imports, on which the State collects great revenue, is larger than before the war; the volume of animal feeding stuffs is much less!

As a farmer himself and speaking out of his experience, Mr. Winder's testimony has great weight. His proof that the freedom of trade is an absolute essential for a flourishing agriculture is unanswerable. If there is a fault in his emphasis it is in suggesting that Free Trade *alone* will bring the desired prosperity, pictured as the restoration of the conditions that existed before 1914 when, under Free Trade, the British people are said to have had "the highest standard of living" and to have been "the best fed people on earth." The test, however, is lacking to substantiate comparisons with other countries, and as to that alleged high standard of living conceived as being enjoyed abundantly by *all* classes in the community, the facts dispute it. Despite Free Trade, the problems of low wages and unemployment had not been resolved. On the contrary, as Mr. Winder remarks (not observing his own contradiction), those best fed people, enjoying the highest standard of living, were turning their backs on an eldorado that was not apparent to them; they were fleeing from it and were emigrating in thousands to the "wilderness of our Dominions" where land was "free." Mentioned also is the agitation for Tariff Reform which in those days made tremendous headway because of its appeal, plausible as it was, that the cure for industrial distress lay in the application of protective tariffs. But no explanation is vouchsafed of what drove people to emigrate or of the reason why Tariff Reform gained such a hearing. The bitterness and misery which underlay such phenomena are so close in the general memory that an actual disservice is done to Free Trade in maintaining, as Mr. Winder seems to do, that all would be well if we succeeded in restoring the measure of Free Trade that obtained previous to 1914.

The conditions of land tenure as affecting agriculture, or any use of land, are of vital importance. The alleged stupid obstinacy of the British farmer is surely not the

complete story of those who "preferred bankruptcy" to changing their methods. In one of his asides, Mr. Winder reveals that "it was forbidden in thousands of leases" to plough up a field of pasture or even to improve it. He makes it obvious that under that landlord and tenant system, the producer was not in fact free and that agriculture suffered. It is well enough to condemn the controls and restrictions interposed by governments, but the significance of the powers exercised by landlord privilege deserves more than a passing reference, otherwise any analysis of the subject is incomplete. There is a reference to the free land that played its part in the progress of Colonial farming but the land laws in relation to British agriculture, which must obviously dominate all other factors, are not examined. For example, with the ostensible object of helping farmers, agricultural land was exempted from local taxation; but the relief did not stay with them; it was cashed by landowners in higher prices for land. Such has been the destiny of all aids and subsidies, so much so that the artificial monopoly price given to land is the greatest menace of all to agricultural development, a formidable barrier to everyone who to-day seeks a farm, there to earn a living.

During the acclaimed "golden age" of British farming, the pittance remaining to the landless labourers and

artisans was so small that they came eventually to regard Free Trade as a matter of indifference to themselves; and there is little reason to suppose that a revived campaign for Free Trade, divorced from any advocacy of land and taxation reform, would meet with more enthusiasm. No argument in that campaign is likely to be fully convincing unless the freedom of production is associated with the freedom of exchange.

It is evident that Mr. Winder, though he has not in this writing emphasized the connection, is aware of the part that the land question has played throughout. He puts the thought in these words: "Just over a hundred years ago, the people of Great Britain were pressing against their food supply because a ruthless aristocracy largely confined the source of that supply to the lands of Great Britain. It is ironical that to-day, under democracy, the land interests have been able to effect the same imprisonment of the British people." Such criticism of this book as we have offered, indicating some of its faults of omission, should not be allowed to detract from its positive achievement—its shattering exposure of the corrupt and disastrous régime that has been imposed on the country by sectional interests and by the mistaken ideas of those who think in terms of the "planned economy." In this Mr. Winder has rendered an eminent service.