

## THE LAND QUESTION IN THE BALKANS

In an illuminating article in *MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE* for February, on the "Balkan States," by Mr. J. W. McConaughy, information is given concerning the system of landholding in Serbia, Bulgaria and Rumania. The following extracts are of special interest.

### Serbia

The civilisation of the Serbs may not measure up to Western standards. They know nothing of the blessings of child labour and there is not a poorhouse or a community of paupers in the entire kingdom. Pauperism, as the western nations understand it, is unknown.

In this connection it must be remembered that Serbia has been out from under the Turkish yoke only a little more than a third of a century. Under Turkish rule it was not allowed to have schools or to build roads. Good roads would have offered the Serbs a certain facility of movement, which might have enabled them to get together and fight their oppressors. Education would have pointed out to them the need and the means for such a struggle.

Consequently, all that has been done in Serbia in the way of enlightenment has been done in a little more than one generation. Take it by and large, the record is not bad. The government of this small and landlocked state has so managed its affairs that it is practically impossible for a Serbian to become rich enough to oppress his fellow men, or poor enough to accept oppression.

The Serbs are naturally a nation of small farmers, and their constitution was framed with the idea of preventing any one from making them a nation of farm-labourers, or peons on the ground that once they owned in freehold. No matter how badly a Serbian manages his financial affairs, those with whom he deals understand that under no circumstances can they obtain a mortgage on his home, on his farming implements and beasts of burden, or on the land that can be plowed by a span of oxen in a long summer day.

Freedom of conscience and of the press, and the right of peaceable assemblage, are also guaranteed. They have a king, but no aristocracy, no nobles, no idle rich. One of their kings was a swineherd, and Serbia alone of the Balkan peoples has chosen her reigning house from families of her own blood. Every man who pays three dollars a year in taxes and is over twenty-one years of age is a voter, and helps to elect the members of the national assembly, which has the power to raise and appropriate funds, the king having a veto something like that of an American President.

One king sought to override his limitations. He and his wife, and their principal friends and backers, were murdered with a calm and painstaking thoroughness which shocked the western world, but left Serbia unruffled by so much as a tremor of revolutionary spirit.

According to our standards, this sort of thing is, of course, indefensible. When an English or French king has been guilty of treason it has usually been necessary to kill off a few hundred thousand entirely innocent people before he could be brought to justice. And at this writing Greece seems to be threatened with a similar experience because of a faithless ruler who is ignoring the constitution that he has sworn to uphold.

Among the farmers, the German system of co-operative credit has grown up. It is often necessary for the Serbian farmer, as for the American, to borrow money for legitimate farming purposes. It is evident from the inalienation law, that the borrowing capacity of the individual agriculturist must be extremely limited; therefore ten or so

pool their interests. When one wants to borrow, he must obtain the consent and indorsement of the other nine. In this way there is no reckless borrowing, and no defaulting. There is a low interest rate on loans, and the terms of payment are reasonable.

The Serbs live almost entirely on the surface of the land. Back in their mountains are untouched treasures of coal and iron. This, again, to the apostles of modern progress, stamps them as a backward people, it being the accepted idea to rip the riches out of the earth and use them up as rapidly as possible, without a thought for future generations.

And there is another treasure there that has been but too little touched. Among the hills of the Morava and the Drina were born all the quaint folk-lore and song, and the unsoiled poetry of an unspoiled breed.

### Bulgaria

In many respects their Bulgarian neighbours are an even more remarkable people. The last of these small nations to escape Turkish degradation, they are the most energetic and pushing. They have a commendable lust of learning, and are filled with the spirit of western progressiveness. Unlike the Serbs, they are not pure Slav, nor yet are they as pronounced hybrids as the Rumanians. There is an admixture of Tartar blood which gives the typical Bulgarian countenance more of an Asiatic cast than is found elsewhere in the Balkans.

There is very little that is Oriental about the Bulgars. Their attitude toward their womenfolk is the test. The Bulgarian girl has every opportunity to get an education, broaden her view-point, and develop her powers. The result is that she puts up her braids, dons her western clothes, and takes an active interest and part in the affairs of the community.

The Bulgarians have been known as the Peasant People. In so far as the clean simplicity and honest industry of their lives makes for a peasant people, this is a good description. If possible, they are even more democratic than the Serbs. The Serbs abolished their nobles. The Bulgars never had any. They are true children of the earth in which they delve, unswerving of purpose, obstinate as a rock, sparing of speech and money, as practical as a plough, and as immovable as rent-day.

The Bulgarians are like the Serbs in that they have no idle rich class and no pauper class, and in that they are jealous of their natural treasures beneath the hills. They are also like the Serbs in that they are formidable fighting men. It was the Bulgarian army that accepted and held the post of honour when the Balkan League attacked Turkey in 1912.

### Rumania

Rumania has not solved economic problems in the naive and direct fashion of her Balkan neighbours. The peasants of Rumania are farm-labourers. The land is owned by wealthy landlords, and these are seldom to be found at home; so not only is there the curse of closely held property in the hands of the few, but there is also the evil of what is known all over the world to-day as "absenteeism." This problem is giving Rumania grave concern—or, rather, was doing so until the great war inflamed Europe.

Rumania has her stake in this war, and at this writing the world is hourly expecting her to strike for it. It is another of the endless complications resulting from the conflicting claims of Balkan earth-hunger. She holds a strip of land wrested from Bulgaria in the war of 1913, and the Bulgars want to take it back. From Austria Rumania wants Transylvania and the crownland of Bukowina, both chiefly Rumanian in population. From Russia, on the other side, she would like to receive a part of Bessarabia which was hers from 1856 to 1878.