

## County Versus Country

By DOUGLAS J. J. OWEN

THE English Counties are said by Winston Churchill, writing before he became Premier, to be the "fosterers and guardians of that tradition" by which England ruled. True it is, that the "County" influence in the social life of provincial England is paramount. It is the big county estates, with their residences of the peerage lords, barons, baronets, knights—that form the basis of the English social structure. The Hall, castle or mansion, surrounded by its park, invariably uncultivated, is surrounded in turn by a wider circle of tenant farmers—of whom there are 300,000 or more in all—regularly paying their rents to the great hall. Such a county seat may have 20, 30 or more such tenants, and these in their turn employ their agricultural laborers, numbering 700,000 or more at a war-time minimum wage of 48 shillings per week. Notwithstanding the Marxian presentation of the industrial machine aspects of modern life, it is the largest "industry" of all—the extraction of rent by the county families from the most numerous of all classes of workers that dominates English politics, even in the present time of war. Our "capitalists," the partners and directors of our great manufacturing concerns, fulfill their ambitions when they can buy a place in the country, become amateur farmers, and be introduced into those county circles where political influence is most potent. Sheriffs, county councillors and county magnates exercise this influence as they give their patronage to the Church, to the arts, to education. The county hunt, and the county ball have not been interrupted by the war, though the county families find an additional social activity in various auxiliary adjuncts to the military efforts, whilst their young men furnish the ranks with officers.

Attention is being diverted from the landed interest and its influence on the nation's destiny by a concerted attack on high wages. There is a shortage of agricultural workers at present, not to be wondered at when their wages are compared with those of workers in munition and allied industries. War wages are so high as to give concern to those who have to solve the country's war finance problems, and letters are written to *The Times* urging some method of controlling wages. Engineers' wages are indeed nominally high, but they can hardly be said to be unduly high as regards spending value in view of rising costs of living. None the less, there is this persistent demand for a check on wages. Once again, it is said to be the workers' voracious appetite for high wages that is spelling ruin, by undermining the export trade, raising war costs, and causing inflation. And rent is not mentioned at all.

Beyond supplying the personnel for the higher ranks in

the civil and other services, what does the "county" do for the country? Let us see. There have been three War Budgets so far; in September 1939, and April and July of this year. Last September an additional £107 millions had to be raised by taxation and £895 millions by borrowing. The same month a telegram was sent to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on behalf of 50 Members of Parliament, drawing attention to the Land Values fund in these words:

*Five hundred million pounds just waiting to be collected from values all communally created and which should go to the community, not to landowners. The effect will be that land will be forced into the best use, compared with the present position—Ipswich as an example, where 50 per cent of rateable area is idle and unrated, though of immense value. Alternatively, urge permission be granted to local authorities to levy rates on site value.*

No notice was taken of this by the Government—quite naturally perhaps, in a Parliament in which the ruling force is the landed class. In vain Mr. R. R. Stokes, M. P., the author of the telegram, pointed out that the Air Ministry had paid £2,000,000 for 40,000 acres, or £50 per acre for land which as agricultural land was considered valueless for rating and taxing purposes.

In April 1940, a further £1,234 millions was to be raised by taxation, and £1,400 millions by borrowing, or inflation, as it is called by Col. Josiah Wedgwood, who warned the House of Commons that in every country in the world where inflation had taken place, as currency depreciates the saleable value of land rises. Again, no step towards land value taxation was even contemplated.

In July 1940, provision was made for further taxation to the amount of £239 millions, and still the land value fund remained the only subject of taxation left untaxed, notwithstanding that the danger of inflation was far from being staved off. Amendments to the Budget advocating land value taxation are not even given time for discussion. High spending power is still considered the source of weakness, and the attack on wages proceeds.

It is obvious that labor in the munition factories has become so vitally necessary, and the conscripting of 4,000,000 men for the forces has so intensified the value of labor, that wages are rising by economic law and may some day even reach the level where they represent the full value of the workers' contribution to production. Undoubtedly the nation's wage bill, though still below the just wage level, is a serious item in Great Britain's financial problem.

But Parliament has not been allowed to ignore entirely the rising cost of that other necessary factor in peace-time and war-time production—the land. With great persistence a number of members have drawn attention to the exorbitant prices demanded for land required for national defence purposes. As far back as 1935 the prices paid for

aerodrome sites constituted a scandal. In February 1936, a Conservative Member asked the Minister for Air "whether he is aware of the grave menace to British aviation by speculators of a certain type who are hindering and obstructing plans for airport construction by buying up useless adjoining land when airport plans become known, and demanding exorbitant prices?"

In 1936, land at Ringway, Manchester, for example, belonging to a county family, was offered at £24,000 for 128 acres; and another estate near by, of 203 acres, which had been bought in 1930 for £8,000 was offered to the Manchester Corporation for an aerodrome, and £92,000 demanded as the price. This process has continued up to and during the war period. The pages of *Land and Liberty*, the organ of our International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade, regularly supply copious instances of the British land ramp. The July number carries quotations from the Fifth Report of the Select Committee on Public Expenditure exposing the waste of public money on the high cost of land for aerodromes and other public works.

In the various Budget debates these matters have been ventilated, one Member referring to the fact that as a result of the Government going into the country districts looking for sites for camps for evacuated children, the value of land had increased in those parts. When land in the city of Leicester was required for an Air Raid Shelter for infant pupils, £338 had to be paid for 427 square yards, which is at the rate of £3,831 per acre. Thus the nation's extremity is the county and city landowners' opportunity. Men like Mr. A. V. Alexander, M. P., when in opposition, have denounced these conditions and demanded land value taxation, but the Cabinet of which he is now a member turns a blind eye to the whole matter.

There are many aspects of county agricultural life that might be dwelt on:—the huge amounts taken for many years in agricultural subsidies; the large areas of rich land remaining undeveloped or underdeveloped, at a time when food production from our own land is so terribly urgent. But the outstanding fact that passes all understanding in a time of unprecedented peril for the country, is the continued immunity of land from a fair measure of taxation upon its value. All the talk about Fifth Column activities and other newspaper topics, even discussions concerning the rival blockades at sea, serve as a smoke-screen obscuring the silent, hidden blockade of the countryside instituted by the county interest against the interest of the country as a whole, a blockade that not even this emergency is permitted to modify.

It was this same county influence through its nominees in Parliament that secured the overthrow of the Labor government in 1931, and with it the repeal of the Land

Value Tax, with the consequence that the Chamberlain high tariff system was substituted in its place. Whilst these customs duties still further embittered European relationship and precipitated the rise of Hitlerism, they at the same time constituted a self-imposed blockade against ourselves which for nearly ten years has borne as heavily on the people of this country as the air and naval blockade now attempted by our German enemies.

We have submitted to the county interests for generations, but that they should prevail through ten months of desperate war and through three War Budgets is easy proof that the power of land monopoly is only equalled by its lack of patriotism. What a change there would be in the scene if Churchill, the scion of one of the greatest county families, became again the radical Churchill, brilliant advocate of the Taxation of Land Values!

## The Unemployed

By HENRY A. COIT

**M**IDNIGHT dwells within the heart of those whose leaden feet  
 Drag wearily from dawn 'till dark along an endless street —  
 The heart from which all hope has fled and left despair complete.  
 Pallor sits upon the cheek and dullness haunts the eye,  
 The shoulders stoop, the muscles droop of those sad men who try  
 To find some work for idle hands lest something in them die.  
 'Tis sad to see a willing man who hungers for the soil  
 Wear out his life on city streets in search of honest toil  
 While, serpent like, both want and crime around about him coil.  
 'Tis sad to see a man whose gaze is always downward cast—  
 Who never looks at Heaven's sun—whose countenance seems masked  
 A man who has no forward look—whose dreams are in the past.  
 'Tis sad to see a beaten man whose hair is turning grey—  
 Who seeks for honest work to do, and asks but honest pay—  
 Whose brain and brawn are in their prime, and yet is turned away.  
 'Tis sad to see that such a man must seek and ask in vain—  
 To know those willing, eager hands may never work again.  
 In such a man Ambition dies while Hope's already slain.  
 'Tis sad to see such men as these dependent on a dole.  
 Cold charity exacts from such a devastating toll.  
 And while the heart lies dead in each, there's terror in each soul.  
 Eleven million idle men and acres yet untilled;  
 And thirty million underfed with hearts and bodies chilled;  
 Is this the great Democracy for which our blood was spilled?  
 With idle men on waiting lands—their feet upon the sod;  
 With useful tools in willing hands to serve as staff and rod—  
 Their heavy hearts would fill with song, and faces lift to God.

**W**E must learn to distinguish between natural and un-  
 natural conditions, between health and disease. We  
 must learn to seek causes and not take the apparent for the  
 real. Our social evils are due to violations of natural law;  
 they are as pathological as the acts of a mind deranged and  
 as unreliable in determining conditions.—OSCAR H. GEIGER.