

# EXPLODING CITIES

WHAT city growth is doing to the countryside is very much in the news in North America. One hears almost nothing else in the talk of town-planners, and even the daily newspapers and national magazines now cry aloud the problems associated with "urban sprawl". This is not a uniquely American problem — Rome has been growing at the same rate as Los Angeles for some decades — but the automobile has tended to spread the growing population farther and faster in America.

This review is concerned with two of the more recent English publications dealing with urban encroachment, a book by Professor Wibberley of Wye College, *Agriculture and Urban Growth* (1) and a pamphlet by J. B. Cullingworth of the University of Manchester, *Restraining Urban Growth—The Problem of Overspill* (2).

Professor Wibberley's book draws largely on the work of a team of researchers, directed by himself, most of whose findings have already been published in a series of admirable reports. Therefore the book does not add much that is not already available and the "new" sections are largely debatable opinions on trade policy, the place of British Agriculture, etc.

Its style is disappointing too. Dr. Wibberley may have been unfortunately influenced by the late Professor R. T. Ely, "the father of land economics" in the United States, whose voluminous output of pedestrian verbiage for decades muddled that particular academic stream. Nevertheless, if the individual reports of the Wye College researchers are not available to the interested reader, Dr. Wibberley's summary can be consulted with profit.

Some of the major points emerging from the Wye College research in relation to the impact of urban growth on agriculture are these:

- \* the net loss of farmland in England and Wales to all other uses between 1900 and 1951 was about 7 per cent or 2,250,000 acres;
- \* the additional area likely to be lost between 1951 and 1971 is from 500,000 to 700,000 acres, the greater part of which will be better-than-average farm land;
- \* farm land is however not wholly lost to food production by being taken into urban use. On the average 14 per cent of each house plot is still used, and more intensively, for food production;
- \* a good deal of lowland rural land could be reclaimed, restored and otherwise much more intensively used;
- \* the agricultural quality of the land should be consciously and scientifically weighed when alternate sites

for town extensions and new towns are under consideration.

Dr. Wibberley suggests a means of measuring the relative desirability of developing one site rather than another for urban use and makes a very good case indeed for doing so. It is astonishing that the planners who have been faced with these momentous decisions as to town siting should not have carefully considered the agricultural quality of alternate sites, but Dr. Wibberley says they have not.

A point not raised by Dr. Wibberley is the possibility of better use of urban land as a way of preventing further encroachment on agriculture. A readable and well-packed summary of recent research on this approach to the problem is Professor Mason Gaffney's article in the U.S. Department of Agriculture 1958 Yearbook, "Urban Expansion—Will It Ever Stop?". Professor Gaffney, who is Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Missouri, attacks two questions: Are our present cities efficient? Do they need to swallow so much good farm land? To both questions the answer is NO. Professor Gaffney says:

"We should probably concede the city first choice over the best land, even the most fertile, just as farmers concede corn first choice of the best wheat land. It may not make much sense to farm steep slopes in the Ozarks, but it would make less sense to put St. Louis there, to put Minneapolis in the north woods, and so on. But this hardly settles the question.

"Cities, even central cities, are not using nearly the land they already contain. These undigested pieces are of negative value to the city itself. Cities exist to bring people together. Vacant and underdeveloped lands tend to keep them apart and thus destroy part of the city's basic resources: cheap distribution and easy access. Even if land had no alternative use in farming, it would pay many a city to draw itself together."

The Wye College researchers have still to address themselves to this aspect of urban-rural land-competition.

The layman interested in the town-planning problem of "overspill", in the arguments over new towns, houses vs flats, and the redistribution of industry, could hardly have a better introduction than J. B. Cullingworth's essay. It is a concise and intelligent statement of the need for an overspill policy and problems associated with it.

Readers of *Land & Liberty* may not always agree with Professor Cullingworth's point of view ("the crucial problem is that of control over employment" and "further controls over office building are urgently required") but they will find that his treatment of the whole matter is instructive and illuminating and that he does not dodge important questions. It is hard to summarise what is already an extremely condensed statement. My best advice is, "buy it."

(1) Published 1959 by Michael Joseph, London. 21s.

(2) Fabian Society (Research Tract No. 211). London, 1960. 3s. 6d.