THE CONDITION OF AGRICULTURE.

A time there was ere England's griefs began,
When every rood of ground maintained its man,
For him light labour spread her wholesome store,
Just gave what life required, but gave no more.
Goldsmith—"The Deserted Village."

The Board of Agriculture and Fisheries have issued the annual volume of Agricultural Statistics for the year 1905, and to the land reformer this collection of documents should prove of great interest. It contains a mine of information on the agricultural side of the land question, and the introduction by Colonel Craigie renders valuable assistance in arriving at an understanding of the mass of statistical tables. The official view of the condition of agriculture is, as might be expected, rosy, but after a careful examination of the facts set forth in this and previous volumes one cannot but come to the conclusion that for once during his "raging and tearing" propaganda Mr. Chamberlain was right when he told us at Greenock that "agriculture—the greatest of all the trades and industries of this country—has been practically destroyed"—although we disagree as to the cause of its depression. Comparisons, it is said, are odious, but to realise the gravity of the present condition of our great industry we must look back over a period of years and compare the figures for 1905 with those supplied for an earlier period—say the average for the years 1871-5.

The following table shows the acreage of land under cultivation in 1905 and 1871-5 :—

Total area of land and water in Great Britain, 56,787,590 acres.

Description.	1905.		Average, 1871-5.		Increase +. Decrease −.	Inc. or Dec. %
Area under Crops & Grass,	32,286,832		31,125,726		+ 1,161,106	3·73
Corn Crops—		PerCent. of Area under Cultivation.		PerCent. of Area under Cultivation.		
Wheat.....	1,796,995	5·57	3,526,802	11·33	− 1,729,807	49·05
Barley.....	1,713,664	5·31	2,367,143	7·61	− 653,479	27·61
Oats.....	3,051,376	9·45	2,671,633	8·58	+ 379,743	14·21
Other Corn Crops.....	492,197	1·52	952,598	3·06	− 460,401	48·33
Total Corn Crops.....	7,054,232	21·85	9,518,176	30·58	− 2,463,944	25·89
Green Crops—						
Potatoes.....	608,473	1·88	549,909	1·77	+ 58,564	10·65
Turnips.....	1,589,273	4·92	2,129,038	6·84	− 539,765	25·35
Mangold.....	404,123	1·25	339,928	1·09	+ 64,195	18·88
Other Green Crops.....	475,173	1·48	616,410	1·98	− 141,237	22·91
Total Green Crops.....	3,077,042	9·53	3,635,285	11·68	− 558,243	15·36
* Clover, &c.....	4,477,518	13·87	4,388,906	14·10	+ 88,612	2·25
‖ Permanent Pasture.....	17,200,494	53·27	12,883,522	41·39	+ 4,316,972	33·51
Fallow, &c.....	477,546	1·48	699,837	2·25	− 222,291	31·76

* For Hay, 49 per cent. ‖ For Hay, 28 per cent.

In considering these figures it must be borne in mind that in addition to the area under crops and grass we have in Great Britain 2,768,000 acres of woods and plantations; and 12,763,000 acres of mountain and heathland used for grazing. Altogether, the Agricultural Returns account for some 80% of the whole area, the remaining 20% including the land occupied by towns, wastes, water, and land incapable of profitable cultivation, and also the area occupied by the numerous holdings of one acre or less, which are not the subject of annual returns.

Let us consider these figures. In the short space of 30 years 49% of the area under wheat has gone out of cultivation, and for the whole of the corn crops, including wheat, 26% less land is now used than was the case in 1875. Green crops are less by 15% than a generation ago. The seriousness of these facts seems to be increased when we find that the area under "cultivation" for all purposes has increased by over a million acres in the same period. Thus, while we have been adding to the total area under "crops and grass," we have been losing millions of acres which once grew good stuffs. A glance at the table will shew in what direction these acres have disappeared. They are now to be found in the permanent grass-land, which has increased by about 4,500,000 acres. Permanent pasture is very necessary in agriculture, but in no other country do we find 60% of the cultivable land laid down as permanent pasture, nor does it require any argument to prove that a very much smaller area than is now in use would be sufficient to meet requirements.

A recent writer upon the condition of agriculture endeavoured to prove that this large addition to pasture was due to the fact that whilst the growing of cereals had decreased a larger number of cattle were now reared on pasture in Great Britain, and that our loss in the former was made up by our gain in the latter. Let us see. In 1905 we had 6,987,020 cattle and 25,257,196 sheep, and in 1871-5 5,813,123 of the former and 28,790,018 of the latter. To understand the comparison let us assume that eight sheep are equivalent to one head of cattle, and we then have in 1905 10,144,169 as against 9,411,875 in 1875, an increase of 732,294, or 7·78%. In actual numbers of cattle we have a substantial increase, but is this increase proportionate to the increase in the area laid down for rearing them? By taking the area of permanent pasture and the number of cattle in 1871-5 we find that to every 1000 acres of the former we had 731 of the latter, but in 1905 we had only 589! The argument that we produce more "meat" therefore falls to the ground. It must also be remembered in this connection that, in addition to the permanent pasture, there are 12,763,000 acres of mountain and heathland used for grazing purposes. By adding these, the number of cattle in 1905 to every 1000 acres of pasture and grazing land is reduced to 337!

Twenty years ago we produced one-third of the wheat required: to-day we depend upon the foreigner for 78% of our supplies. Since 1871 the numbers employed in agriculture have decreased by 31%. That bold peasantry which was once the cherished jewel of Britain is gone. No industry has fallen so low, and no other industry could have been saved so easily from destruction.

The Tariff Reform Party say that agriculture is ruined by the foreigner: that so long as cheap corn is dumped down upon our shores there can be no salvation for the farmer. Let us "protect" the industry, say they; but the British people, remembering the bad old times of the Corn Laws, wisely decline to adopt such a course. Another set of philosophers say we can't grow corn: the soil is not good and our system of agriculture is bad. Our methods are not the best, but a glance at the Agricultural Returns will show that, with the exception of Belgium, Holland, and New Zealand, we can grow more bushels of wheat to the acre than any other country in the world. Then we have the argument that our population is too large; and that we are a manufacturing, not an agricultural, nation. But Belgium, which has 972 persons to every 1000 acres, against 558 for the United Kingdom, is not only able to provide for herself, but is able to send us, in addition to other food supplies, over 1,000,000 cwts. of wheat and flour. According to Laveleye the natural soil of Belgium is decidedly

less fertile than that of this country, and requires very heavy manuring to overpower its sterility. But Belgium has a different land system, and that is the cause of her agricultural prosperity. From this it is not intended to argue that the land system of Belgium is the right one. The system of dividing the land is economically bad, but bad as it is it enables the Belgians to get as much out of the land as possible. It gives a large amount of freedom to production which our system does not.

Agriculture is depressed because of the rents imposed upon it and the unfair restrictions with which landlords hamper it. Take a case in point. A group of farms, embracing 36,648 acres, taken indiscriminately from various counties in England, paid some years ago £37,044 in rent, or about 21/- per acre per annum. After paying rates (2/6 per acre) the total profit accruing to the farmers was £2,315, or 1/3 per acre. That is to say, the farmer for his industry and energy received 1/3 per acre, whilst the landlord for his laziness received 21/-. Cases could be quoted of farms a few years ago where the landlords took the whole of the profits for the year in rent, and in some instances more than the profits were handed over to the landlords.

There is no incentive given to agriculture by a system under which the farmer works only to fill the pockets of his landlord. The farmer knows, too, that every improvement he makes will raise his rent and increase his rates. If he refuses to pay, the door is opened, and he is kicked out.

So far we have dealt with the present. What of the future? How is the revival of agriculture to be brought about? Legislation, ostensibly for the improvement of the industry, we have had in the past. But such legislation has always secured to the landlord party the maintenance of high rents. Protection has been suggested as a remedy—but Protection of the sort Mr. Chamberlain now advocates won't do. As he told us in 1885, Protectionists would tax the food of the people in order to raise the rents of the landlords. Mr. Edwin Pratt in his recent work, "The Organisation of Agriculture," advocates co-operation amongst farmers not only in production but in putting their goods on the market. So far, the British farmer has looked askance at such proposals, and will continue to do so so long as present conditions prevail. He knows that the landlords have both eyes on the main chance, and never lose an opportunity of swelling their incomes, no matter at whose cost. To revive agriculture, we must alter our land system by breaking down land monopoly; by forcing the landlords to put every inch of their land to its best use. And this can only be done by compelling the owners of land to give back to the community a fair proportion (to start with) of the value which the people have given to the land. Such a call upon the landlords would force millions of idle acres into use. It would throw the burdens of the rates upon the landlords, and it would secure to the farmer and everyone else the benefits of his or their improvements. It would give an impetus to agriculture as great or greater than was given to the industry in New Zealand and New South Wales after the Land Value Tax had been imposed. The effect in New Zealand is shown by the following figures:—

	1891.	1904.
Number of Occupied Holdings, ...	41,224	68,680
Land in Cultivation (Acres), ...	8,893,255	13,868,074
Cattle (Number), ...	831,831	1,736,850

The taxation of land values is the remedy for the ills of agriculture and a great many other ills beside. Look at the effect upon the unemployed problem the bringing into cultivation of the millions of acres of good cultivable land which are now lying idle or labour-starved would have. On 10,000,000 of these idle acres—only a small proportion of the idle land—we could place 1,000,000 families, or 5,000,000 men, women, and children. This means that 5,000,000 people would be drafted from the slums and mining districts into the country; and, consequently, there would be 5,000,000 fewer people competing in the towns for wages and house-room. The unemployed and the overcrowding problems would be solved, whilst the great increase in the amount of home-grown food would immensely strengthen the position of the Empire.

Upon a permanent settlement of the land question rests not only the future of agriculture, but the happiness and prosperity of a great people. The griefs which Goldsmith refers to in the lines quoted above were caused by landlordism. For centuries Britain has sorrowed, and still sorrows, under the burden. We who remember Cobden's words—"You who shall liberate the land will do more for your country than we have done in the liberation of its trade," are trying to bring light to the eyes and solace to the hearts of the people. The fight with the party of oppression and reaction has just begun in earnest. The struggle may be long, but in the end justice will prevail.

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