

"Too Many People" By ROBERT CLANCY

IN 1798 appeared *An Essay on the Principle of Population* by the Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus—a book which asserted that there are too many people in the world, and that those who cannot support themselves and their families have no right to a livelihood; Nature commands such to "take themselves away" under penalty of having it done for them through pestilence, famine and war.

The fortunes of Malthusianism have varied in the century and a half since its promulgation. In 1879 Henry George in *Progress and Poverty* dealt what should have been the death blow to the overpopulation theory, and indeed it fell from favor up to the present. But today the cry is being taken up again—"Too many people!"

The current neo-Malthusianism asserts that most of mankind is terribly guilty of having wasted the world's limited resources in the face of a rising birth rate.

As for laying waste our resources, more will be said later. As for "too many people," this is a curious reversal of the accepted attitude not many years ago. Before World War II, we were told by scholars and statisticians how sparsely populated the world actually is; the State of Texas, they said, could comfortably support all the people in the world with no crowding. Hendrik Van Loon in his *Geography* told us that all the people of the world could be placed in a box of one-eighth of a cubic mile. The dictators were urging their subject peoples to increase their numbers—special honors were paid to large families. The big problem of the day was "overproduction," glutted markets. All this at a time when world population had tripled since the days of Malthus!

Then came a war which cost millions upon millions of lives. The practice of genocide accounted for more millions. And all of a sudden we have "overpopulation." The rising birth rate is pointed to—even though the same thing has happened after every war. The neo-Malthusians, who pride themselves on a long-term view, assume that this trend is here to stay. "Malthus was right, after all," and even his absurd formula on the geometric increase of the population and the arithmetic increase of subsistence is regarded with favor.

The scholars studying the population-resource problem call it ecology—man's relation to his environment. They are careful to point out that they are not concerning themselves with economic and social factors—which is a pity; they might discover some things which would shed light on the "overpopulation" problem.

The basic problem, according to our modern ecologists, is agricultural—the ability or inability of the soil to produce man's subsistence; for man is completely dependent on plants that secure their own nutrition directly from the soil. Here is another almost comical reversal of position. For the past fifty years it has been drummed into us that land is no longer so important as it was, that industry and manufacturing are the forces to be reckoned with today. Now, it seems, the focal issue around which hinges the very survival of the human race is not only land, but the most elementary form of production on the land—agriculture.

This year, besides a stream of magazine arti-

cles on the subject, two important books have appeared which have produced a storm of discussion—*Our Plundered Planet* by Fairfield Osborn, and *Road to Survival* by William Vogt. These ecologists give a double answer to the population-resource problem. 1. Conserve our resources. 2. Check the increase of population.* Not quite so merciless as Malthus, they would not have the present unwanted population "take themselves away." Their plan is for the future—the near future, they warn.

We are deceived, say Messrs. Osborn and Vogt, by the size of our planet. Three-fourths of the surface is water. (At any rate, no water shortage!) Of the 50 million square miles of land surface, or 32 billion acres, one half is uninhabitable. Why one-half must be written off as permanently uninhabitable is not thought necessary of explanation. Have not men made gardens bloom where there were deserts? In many sections of the globe that are now desert, it has been found that the soil is actually rich in the elements needed for agriculture and lacks only water. There is plenty of water, but not in the right places. Why, with all our modern engineering marvels, couldn't water be diverted to these potential gardens? Messrs. Osborn and Vogt admit that our industrial advances have been phenomenal, but it does not seem to them that they could be applied to agriculture—"Too costly and impractical." And what of vast arable areas in Brazil, Africa and Asia, now unexploited? "Who would want to live there?" asks Mr. Osborn. Well, who wanted to live anywhere in the New World 400 years ago?

Nevertheless, let us accept the reduction to a mere 25 million square miles, or 16 billion acres of the world as habitable. Of these, says Mr. Osborn, only 4 billion acres are suitable for agriculture. In passing he mentions that less than 2½ billion acres of this fertile land are in use. It is a pity that ecologists are not more concerned with economic and social factors, for here indeed would be a fruitful line of inquiry. But the only lesson Mr. Osborn draws is that because of insufficient land "no wonder there are world-wide shortages and that the people of a number of nations are facing starvation."

Granted that the earth's resources are not limitless, and that through carelessness and neglect, mankind has plundered and wasted much of the planet's supplies. Can we afford to ignore the social causes of this neglect? It is an ob-

* Robert C. Cook, the New York Times reviewer of Mr. Vogt's book, respectfully calls the United Nations' attention to the model example of Ireland: "The population of Ireland in 1848 was 6,000,000. Today it is less than 3,000,000—and Ireland is the place where Britons go to get a square meal." Mr. Cook might have selected a different country for an example of population control. The inference is that Ireland is facing better with less people. Our reliable sources inform us that the people of Ireland are living in as wretched squalor as ever. As for Britons going to Ireland for a square meal, we wonder whether Jonathan Swift's "modest proposal" has finally been adopted!

† An excellent example of such a transformation may be found in the August 16 issue of Life magazine, which describes how California's once barren Imperial Valley was converted into the country's richest garden spot by irrigation from the Colorado River. Production there has paid many times over the cost of the project.

served fact that tenant farmers have little or no interest in the land they cultivate. In many cases, before moving on, they exhaust the soil within a few years where more interested application and conservation would keep it productive indefinitely. In the United States farm tenancy has steadily increased until now over 50 per cent of farm workers are tenants or sharecroppers. In most other countries, farm tenancy is even greater and land monopoly more notorious.

Mr. Osborn draws lessons from past civilizations. The once fertile Tigris-Euphrates valley is now a desert. The soil was blighted. Overpopulation? Conquering armies overran the area, leaving ruin in their wake and carrying away the agricultural workers as slaves. Says Mr. Osborn, there were "not enough men left to carry on the perennial work of restoration and land care which alone would preserve fertility." (Italics mine.) A clear case of underpopulation! Can there be any doubt of the parallel with what has been happening to our own resources?

But the most astonishing example of shortsightedness by our neo-Malthusians is their failure to reckon with the fact that, even with vast areas of fertile land unused, even with the neglect caused by farm-tenancy and migration, even with the havoc wrought by war, there is still a farm surplus on the market regularly. Only recently the U. S. Government had to buy and dump 196 million bushels of potatoes that farmers couldn't sell. More bumper crops are forecast for this year—a "problem"! Livestock men are deliberately reducing their cattle production because they cannot sell. All this, even with the European Recovery Program! How can the problem of maldistribution still be overlooked?

Mr. Vogt castigates our obsolete thinking processes that cannot see entire problems but only a narrow, over-simplified aspect. Elsewhere in his book Mr. Vogt reminds us that every bit of food we put into our mouths "must be replaced by another bit of the earth—somewhere." And that while our demands grow, the capacity of the earth is constantly shrinking. A superb example of one-way thinking!

Recently I had the opportunity to speak with a professor of economics, a neo-Malthusian. He spoke of the dense population of Europe. I reminded him that Denmark, with 400 people per square mile, is still able to produce dairy products for export. "Yes," said the professor, "but they must import wheat." It didn't seem to impress him that the countries sending wheat would get dairy products and that this exchange caused extra wheat to be produced. Somewhere in the world, wheat was being depleted because of the demand of the Danes! As long as such one-dimensional thinking dominates, the real nature of the world problem will be obscured.

It is to be hoped that the current interest in ecology will lead to recognition of the real problem. Just now it is going into the blind alley of "overpopulation." Not many years ago, the myth of racial superiority had its final ghastly day at court before it was exploded forever. Perhaps this is the last stand of the overpopulation myth.