

## THE POPULATION QUESTION

Dr Vere Pearson's new book\* deals exhaustively with the causes that underlie the growth and erratic distribution of human population on the surface of the Globe. The introductory and the succeeding chapter seem to have been written around the idea that is central to the doctrine of Professor J. S. Haldane, that an organism and its environment are one, and cannot properly be thought of separately; that their action and re-action upon each other are constant and intimate; that, in short, they mutually "condition" each other. In searching out the influences that have determined the migrations and local settlements of population Dr Pearson brings to bear considerations of geographical contours, climate, fertility of soil, water supply, means of transport, primitive and modern systems of land tenure, and finally Man himself, his mind, his primitive impulses, his reflective faculty, his moral and aesthetic senses, his gift of reason—all that part of him indeed that is covered by the word Psychology. Thus, out of the large store of information offered to us we can see Man having his character shaped and moulded by Circumstance, and in return gradually remoulding his environment "nearer to his heart's desire."

It is assuredly from no under-estimate of the value of Dr Pearson's voluminous statistics and comparisons, taken from the public records of many countries, that we are constrained to admit that our chief interest in this book centres upon the obvious fact of his whole-hearted devotion to the Gospel of Henry George. In the course of a richly-informative survey of "developments in Agriculture" and social conditions prevailing in India, Africa, and the Far East, and occupying many chapters, the author's belief is evident that the movements of population have not been what they ought to have been or would have been had not a malign influence been at work deflecting these movements from their proper direction. That influence he finds everywhere the same—the tendency of men in all ages and at all degrees of intellectual culture to fence in portions of the earth, and on the plea of ownership obstructing the healthy and natural movements of the people. Persons of a Theological cast of mind may perhaps trace this tendency back to that ubiquitous poisoner of the wells of Truth—the Devil; for there seems no limit to what cunning may achieve under existing conditions in laying hold of mankind's common heritage Economic Rent, as is shown later in the chapter on "Town and Country Planning."

In the chapter headed "Rural Depopulation" and in many of the foregoing pages the author sets forth with great lucidity the case for a sane system of land tenure, and exhibits the evils that still result, as in the days of the Hebrew Prophets, from the "laying of field to field so that the people have no room." Among these evils we deplore with Dr Pearson the decay of artistic handicraft which inevitably follows from the compulsory trek of the villager to the city factory; but the faith persists in the minds of those who have discovered the root-cause of rural depopulation, that, given the light work, ample leisure and sense of security that will fall to each man's lot when the social heritage is rescued from the grip of monopoly, the artistic sense will revive, the creative impulse reassert itself, and at last we shall have "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." But as a counterpoise to the tale of depopulated villages and distressful conditions in other countries like our own, it is cheering to read of Northern Nigeria, of which

it is said that its tranquillity and commercial prosperity are amazing. This fact, a very notable one in the troubled world of to-day, is due to the fact that for 25 years neither landlords nor speculators nor tax-collectors of the vulgar sort have disturbed the tranquillity or checked the prosperity. For why? The land of Northern Nigeria belongs to the people of Northern Nigeria, and the rent paid by its occupiers (revisable at intervals not exceeding seven years) is applied to the public services.

That the maldistribution of population results from the existing fiscal system Dr Pearson has amply demonstrated, but the title of the book includes a reference to the *Growth* of population and we are not clear whether he still fears that population will always tend to outrun the means of subsistence, notwithstanding altered conditions and the disappearance of poverty. Or (we ask ourselves) does Dr Pearson believe with Herbert Spencer that advancing civilization brings with it a self-acting principle which slows down the rate of increase in proportion as the civilizing forces become effective? This assumed automatic principle is expressed in the formula that "Individuation and fecundity vary inversely" and is illustrated by the fact that if we begin our observations with a shoal of herring where individuation is almost nil and fertility very high; and work upwards in the evolutionary scale, we find that with every advance in individuality in the animal creation there comes a decrease in the reproductive tendencies. Does this principle hold good of mankind in society? Does the development of individuality that comes with education, culture, leisure and economic freedom, tend towards a natural, unconscious and effortless reduction in the number of offspring? If so, it surely brings a lively hope that with the advent of equal opportunity and the spread of culture with the development of personality that will certainly follow, the ghost of Malthus will at last be laid.

The chapter on "Birth, Death and Marriage Rates" will interest all who have a sense for statistics and averages. For the ordinary man the interest will lie chiefly with what Dr Pearson calls "the differential birth rate" as between the poor and the well-to-do. It is, and ought to be, distressing to be assured by the figures given, that the *majority* of the next generation (if existing conditions remain) will be born in slums, denied the civilizing influences of education and culture, and exposed to the demoralizing tendencies of the worst environment it is possible to imagine. Dr Pearson, however, believes that the sensitiveness of human nature to the impact of favourable conditions is as keen as its reaction to the unfavourable and will over-ride inherited tendencies. He, therefore, entertains a generous belief in "the unbounded possibilities of improvement if equality of opportunity were opened up for all classes."

The section which deals with sex-love and its corollaries opens the door upon a region into which even angels may fear to tread. On one point, however, we are again in complete agreement with Dr Pearson—that economic factors are the chief causes of these "difficulties," and that economic ills cannot be cured by other than economic methods.

Limits of space forbid more than a reference to the excellent chapters that follow, on Garden cities, Town and country planning, Ground values and property appraisals, etc. In all the instances given of the efforts of public authorities and private bodies to beautify towns or preserve country amenities, to facilitate

\* *The Growth and Distribution of Population.* By S. Vere Pearson, M.D., M.A. George Allen and Unwin, 1934.

influence of unrestricted landownership is shown and illustrated by figures. The land-reform movement is indebted to Dr Pearson for having given this book to the world, and *Land & Liberty* will gratefully acknowledge its value.

ALEX MACKENDRICK.

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In his foreword Dr Pearson acknowledges the assistance of the Rev. Mervyn Stewart, whose word after reading the published book we also have and we quote from his commendation:—

“For many years the Georgist movement has been under increasing obligation to Dr Vere Pearson, but only his closest friends could have foreseen the result of his meditation in a work as deep and broad as its title. How humanity has or has not increased, why folk have moved or not moved to attractive locations—this is surely to state the Social Problem.

“A vast number of admitted authorities are cited. The first quarter, say six chapters, is a study of population groups from early conditions, with special chapters on Asia and Africa which draw out the results of varying systems of land tenure. The duty of the Government of every country is repeatedly stressed—to collect all the land value and expend it for common good with beneficial effects on public health and prosperity. The causes of the rises and falls in vital statistics, births, marriages and deaths, are dealt with.

“Special consideration is given to Town Planning and Garden Cities and the last part discusses ground values and property appraisals, traffic troubles, housing, and emigration, with the physioceratic ideal of co-operation in liberty for the future most powerfully expressed.

“It is not easy for one who has contributed some pebbles which a craftsman has cut into jewels to assess this work. Dr Pearson has given us a book indispensable to our workers and breaking new ground.”