

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ENCLOSURES

AMONG THE many books which have appeared recently in this country as evidences of a growing interest and appreciation of rural life and of its importance to the whole of society, one of the most attractive is Mr. H. J. Massingham's *The English Countryman* (published by B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1942). The letterpress is enhanced by a large number of pleasing illustrations drawn both from ancient and modern sources, for the book is an account of life on the land from medieval times till the present day. We are in company with a scholar who has enlivened and enriched his story with such wealth of literary allusions that the journey through his pages has been a new education. As a social historian Mr. Massingham has some telling things to say about the enclosures and how the English people became landless, and we take leave to make some extracts which we believe will be of particular interest to our readers.

But before we quote from the book, there are some matters of fact and policy to mention with which we would not agree with the author. He is not correct, for instance, in saying that "up to the 14th century land was not purchased." There are still extant many purchase deeds of even earlier date. Neither is it correct to say that land "was not even held by law," for legal proceedings relating to it were not infrequent. What Mr. Massingham no doubt has in mind was that the owner was not able to get rid of his obligations to the Crown, and that the peasant had rights of which he could not be deprived. Certainly during the centuries the ingenuity of lawyers was exercised at the instance of landholders for the purpose of making their rights to the land more complete and absolute, and this with a large measure of success. At the same time the fixing of the feudal dues resulted in their representing a smaller fraction of the rent than they had originally been, and this process was aggravated by depreciation of the currency until in the end the fixed rents became relatively insignificant. The final stage was the abolition of the feudal dues by the Restoration Parliament, and the substitution for them of customs and excise taxes falling upon the whole population.

Neither is it correct to blame the Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries for the turning of land into sheep runs. Sir Thomas More in his *Utopia* says with frankness: "Where ever it is found that the sheep of any soil yield a softer and richer wool than ordinary, there the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men, the abbots, not contented with the old rents which the farms yielded, nor thinking enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it hurt instead of good. They stop the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns, reserving only the churches and enclosed grounds that they may lodge their sheep in them." It is probably true that the English Church in the

18th and 19th centuries favoured enclosures, for as the rents rose so did the tithes. But if the Church had retained the immense landed possessions which it had in the Middle Ages, is there any reason to think that it would not have favoured any change which made its possessions more valuable?

One other comment may be made. Mr. Massingham appears to think that foreign competition of agricultural products is responsible for the woes of the countryside, and that a return to protection is desirable. This view contradicts the lessons of history. When was the condition of the agricultural labourer so pitiable as in the period of high protection at the beginning of last century? Mr. Massingham refers with just appreciation to the agricultural prosperity of Denmark and to the high level of culture attained by its peasants. That was achieved by an adherence to the policy of free trade, coupled with a land system which goes a long way towards security of tenure for the cultivator while yielding to the State the land revenue of which in England it has been deprived. Conversely, the experience of this country during the last war, and again in this one when the enemy's blockade and the need of conserving shipping has imposed a policy of virtual protection, shows that the result is an enormous increase of land values, so making it impossible for the man of moderate means to acquire land. Thus protection in this case, as always, leads to monopoly and enriches the monopolist at the expense of the community.

QUOTATIONS FROM "THE ENGLISH COUNTRYMAN"

[Sub-heads are inserted.—EDITOR,
L. & L.]

The English Peasant

No villager was without rights of commonage on arable, meadow and common, and the custom of the manor was virtually ownership without a written agreement. And since the village was an organic inheritance, it may be said that the meanest bond-servant owned it. The day of the landless labourer, that is to say of the ex-peasant, was not yet. (Page 7.)

Not even the manorial serf had the ground cut from under his feet. The bottom class in the community had his one acre as a bondman and his five acres as a cottar, and this land was his in usufruct and possession as inalienably as was the hide of the freeholder who paid rent in kind to the lord. (Page 7.)

The English peasant was a free man by virtue of his possession of land and stock; if he went into eclipse, he regained what he had lost in a new form, and when he lost his beasts and his holdings from the Enclosures, he disappeared altogether. His history came to an end. (Page 9.)

The peasant rising of 1381, the revolt of the "great society," was not a revolution on behalf of abstract rights

and Utopian conceptions, but a battle for the restoration of the ancient custom. It was a *conservative* revolution. How far back does that customary freedom extend? Who knows? Perhaps to the palæolithic communism of primitive society. (Page 7.)

The immediate cause of the Peasants' Revolt was, of course, the Poll Tax, as Ship Money was of the Civil War. The underlying one was the Statute of Labourers, a desperate expedient of the Government to prevent the demesne lands from falling out of tillage in a depopulated countryside. It reintroduced the principle of forced labour by manorial tenants bound to the soil and lowered the wages bill to the pre-Plague level. In other words, it attempted to "put the clock back," and the peasants retaliated by a rising aimed at swinging it back a good deal further. (Page 10.)

It was against these violations of what mediæval society regarded as *natural law* . . . that "John Nameless and John the Miller and John the Carter and John Trueman and all his fellows" rose like Shelley's wild west wind. (Page 10.)

The peasants hanged a few lawyers, but their violence was principally directed to burning the manorial documents which had displaced the hereditary witnesses to their liberties of the custom of the manor. (Page 10.)

Betrayal and New Serfdom

The reknitting of the ancient hand-hold of the king and his people over the heads of the baronage was broken by the Parliament who forced young Richard to forswear his pledge. It was the Commons who betrayed the commons of England, as it was the Commons who, four centuries later, destroyed them. This is a queer reflection upon the free use of the term "democracy" in modern parlance and the still freer manipulation of the facts of history by later historians. (Page 10.)

What the peasantry did not and could not survive was the hundred years' war upon it between the middle of the 18th and the middle of the 19th centuries, when the forces of government, law, parliament, wealth, religion and commerce were arrayed in one solid phalanx against it. (Page 24.)

Game Laws

By the Game Laws of 1670, game became the property of the squires, while the strengthening alliance between squire and parson still further detached the governing from the labouring classes. In the next century the peasant community was to be metamorphosed into the "labouring poor." (Page 23.)

Danish Contrast

The tragedy of the Enclosures (that is to say, the destruction of the peasantry) was not merely the rapacity that was at the back of them and the consequent suffering they entailed, but that their social effects were unnecessary. If the peasantry of Denmark were saved by the enclosures there

being accompanied by the compensation of from 4 to 6 acres per cottage (an allotment almost identical with the Elizabethan law), so could ours have been. (Page 26.)

The Yeoman

It will be remembered that Latimer, in his famous sermon before Edward VI., said: "My father was a yeoman." He added that he who had once "kept half a dozen men and kept hospitality for his poor neighbours" had lost his land, a passage revealing that Tudor economics were the enemy of the yeoman as well as of the peasant. (Page 34.)

"Instead of families of small farmers, with all their exertions, all their decency of dress and manners, and all their scrupulousness as to character, we have families of paupers with all their improvidence and recklessness belonging to an inexorable sentence of poverty for life. . . . I hold a return to small farms to be absolutely necessary to a restoration to anything like an English community." [Cobbett.] (Page 34.)

The effect of the Enclosures upon the smaller yeomen was, as the Suffolk yokels say, "wholly" defeat. Successful tradesmen swallowed up the lands of many. The loss of the commons meant loss of stock ("strip the small farms of the benefit of the commons, and they are all at one stroke levelled to the ground," said a contemporary observer). Great numbers either emigrated or became labourers. (Page 46.)

Magna Carta

Magna Carta, which saw the struggle between King and Baronage decided in favour of the latter, was by no means a charter of liberty for commoners. . . . It was not a king who destroyed the peasantry but a Parliament of squires which had stripped the king of his prerogatives in money and in land. (Pages 82-83.)

The New Squirearchy

The Dissolution both of the Monasteries and the Guilds of the country towns marked a shifting of the balance of power from the country to the town. The new squirearchy was recruited from courtiers, members of the Privy Council, City of London merchants and land speculators whose rapacity and contempt for the customary rights earned them the name of "caterpillars of the Commonwealth." (Page 86.)

The bridge between the lord of the manor and the squire were the Tudor Enclosures and the bridge between squire and landlord were the 18th and 19th century Enclosures that followed 1688 and 1710. Both were revolutionary movements of force; the earlier seized upon the monastic lands and threw 80,000 peasant farmers into beggary, and the later, more prolonged and ultimately more drastic one, destroyed, but for insignificant exceptions, the meaning of the word "peasant" in the English language. (Page 94.)

Noble Banditry

Land changed hands almost as rapidly as bonds on the Stock Ex-

change, so that gambling in acres was accompanied by rack-renting and an absentee landlordism. Indeed, it is interesting to note how intimately gambling was allied with enclosure. The newly enclosed land in the 18th and 19th centuries was in many instances a reimbursement by higher rentals for gambling losses at Brooks's and White's. (Page 86.)

Naboths like Stump of Malmesbury who sacked the great library where William of Malmesbury had worked. . . . Sir Anthony Kingston, who appointed Hangman's Acre near Painswick, the home-town of the celebrated home-carvers of the region, to commemorate his savage suppression of the anti-enclosure riots on his new estate. . . . The Fettiplaces of Swynbrook on the Lower Windrush are a nayword to this day for adding manor to manor, park to park and chase to chase. Sir Thomas Audley of Audley End, grandfather to the Earl of Suffolk, made a name for himself by rapacity, craft and sycophancy. . . . Building Bess of Hardwick, Countess of Shrewsbury, who built Hardwick Hall, Bolsover, Worksop and Oldcote, may serve as a symbol of the more predatory type of Tudor squire. (Page 87.)

John Leland wrote that the Duke of Buckingham at Thornbury "took very much fair ground, very fruitful of corne, now fair land for coursing." The Duke of Norfolk enclosed forty-four acres because he did not like the shape of his park, while the enclosure of Affleborough Common raised the Kett Rebellion. The account of how Winchcombe's Benedictine Abbey, the last of whose Abbots was a correspondent of Colet's, was literally razed to the ground to build Sudeley Castle, suggests a banditry looting the countryside rather than a royally sanctioned and legalized change of ownership from clerical to secular hands. (Page 88.)

Nevertheless, only one-fifth of the Tudor land was thus despoiled, and out of the desolation rose such proud and ornate piles as Montacute, Compton Winyates and their peers. (Page 88.)

Sir Francis Englefield of Wootton Bassett, who jocketed the villagers out of 100 acres of common by fraud and lawsuits, might have been the living model of the Upstart Country Knight. (Page 88.)

The Hammonds have described from contemporary documents the enclosure of Sedgmoor, in which Lord Stavordale, George Selwyn, Fox and Lord Ilchester were all implicated by means of a private bill (there were 4,000 of them in all) to disinherit the small owners for the sake of recouping Selwyn's gambling losses. (Page 96.)

The Church

Gilbert White and his nephew, James White, in 1793 (the year of his death), defeated the attempt of one Fisher, "a man of a meddling disposition," to enclose the open fields of Selborne parish. He was himself a copyholder with common rights. Therefore, White must be included (to the deep pleasure of his lovers) among those churchmen who from Latimer to William Barnes

raised their voices against the deprivation of the villagers' independence and rights of commonage. (Page 117.)

The Roman Church attempted to dictate to the State; the English Church of the 18th and 19th centuries went over to it. That which had tried to be the State's master succeeded in becoming its servant, and one of the milestones in this record of ecclesiastical progress was the material benefit derived by the parson hardly less than the squire from the Enclosures. (Page 128.)

Peasants and Labourers

In 1381, the peasants broke out of their villages so as not to lose their independence; in 1830, they broke the threshing machines in the villages so as not to lose their jobs with the flail in the winter barns. (Page 68.)

That "rebellion" was crushed with ease, not with guile like the first, and then began the hangings and transportations for poaching and stealing whereby not to starve, the passion of relief when the sentence was death, not the convict settlement; and, following the victory of order and progress, the torrent of emigration either to the new factories or the new colonies. Out of 614,800 acres enclosed by the General Enclosure Act of 1845, only 2,223 acres were earmarked for allotments—and these and the ones that preceded them were a Danaan gift, since the cost of fencing compelled the holders to sell up to speculators. (Page 68.)

When the commoners lost their commons, the degradation was moral, social and economic, all three. The co-operative peasant became the competitive wage-earner, while the desperate poverty of the labourers found a vent in arson, drunkenness, pitched battles with gamekeepers, the promiscuity of gang-labour and a general demoralization set up by pauperism. (Page 65.)

In 1816, forty people were hanged in one day; in 1800, six women were publicly flogged for hedge-pulling till the blood ran down their naked backs; in 1832, a shepherd was transported for life for the customary practice of cooking a lamb that had died; in 1821, three men were hanged at Witney for stealing a sack of flour and some bacon; in 1809, a labourer was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation for stealing a plank by the owner of it. (Page 69.)

If the farm labourer has won his £3 a week minimum wage, he is as far away as ever he was from winning back his land. (Page 72.)

A democratic system depending on votes but not land may secure political but never economic freedom. (Page 26.)

John Stephen's shepherd of 1615 spoke very much like Corin in "As You Like It": "Sir, I am true labourer; I earn that I eat, I get what I wear, owe no man hate, envy no man's happiness, glad of other men's good, content with my calling; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck." (Page 27.)

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