

## THE AGRICULTURAL PROBLEM IN AMERICA

By Alex Mackendrick

It would be well if delegates to agricultural conferences, whose purpose is to discover ways and means of increasing the production of home-grown foodstuffs, would read, learn and inwardly digest the contents of Mr. Herbert Quick's latest book, *THE REAL TROUBLE WITH THE FARMERS*.<sup>\*</sup> Though the story told in this excellent book is of the American farmer, chiefly the grower of wheat and cotton, it is made abundantly clear that the economic pressure under which he suffers, and the specially distressful conditions resulting from transport monopolies and local circumstances, are all due to the same fundamental cause as that which has brought about the decay of agriculture in these islands.

Mr. Quick touches the crucial point in the science of sociology when he remarks that America entered upon a regressive era with that gradual disappearance of free or cheap land which began thirty years ago. We have hitherto, perhaps, been too apt to assume that the vigour, enterprise and virility of the American people is something new in the world, an efflorescence of the human spirit, a breaking forth of hidden fires, an omen of promise for the future of the race, and an earnest of all good things to come. The truth—self-evident when pointed out—is, that the outburst of energy which so captivated our imaginations, the keenly forward look, the cheerful optimism, the stubborn commonsense and the contempt for conventions and traditions, were all due to the fact that the new world offered opportunities upon which monopoly had not yet laid its withering hand.

It is the old, old story; as old as Egypt and Babylon. The free land which might almost have been conceived of as inexhaustible, is gone; the cheap land has followed, and speculative and prohibitive values now attach to every acre of that immense area which once kindled the light of hope in men's eyes and created what we have known and admired as the American spirit. Can these distinctively American characteristics survive the conditions which brought them to birth? Can we hope that the next generation of Americans who are driven to the cities through bankruptcy on the farms, will retain the virile qualities that distinguished their grandparents? May we expect a continued supply of those strong-willed farm-bred men of the Lincoln and Henry Ford type, to enrich the industrial and political life of the United States? These are questions which vex and worry every genuine lover of the American people, and the answers to them are not far to seek in the book before us. History is repeating itself, though at a different rate of speed as compared to former times. To quote Mr. Quick, "Things move more quickly now than with the civilizations of the past. What took them a generation we do in a year. If our farm population is succumbing to influences that destroyed such populations in the past, that fact ought not to be covered up. It ought to be placed in the limelight of investigation and studied." And the study, both of details and principles, in the pages that follow these words, is exhaustive and convincing.

Mr. Quick has no difficulty in exposing the futility of tariffs as a means to increasing the price the American farmer may get for his produce; or, on the contrary, in showing their disastrous effects in raising the price he must pay for all he buys—fertilizers, machinery, and materials for farm upkeep. Neither does he find it hard to show that combinations of farmers for the

purpose of maintaining the price of their products by holding back their troublesome surpluses for gradual release and "orderly marketing," must necessarily be frustrated by the world's competition, particularly that of Argentina, Australia and South Africa. That these surplus products should constitute a problem like the lamp that is choked by excess of oil, surely exposes the irrationality of the economic system on which the world's work is carried on, and shows what fools we mortals are. If the people of the world could eat and wear what their needs demand, those distressing American surpluses of wheat and cotton would quickly disappear. "But meanwhile," we read, "our tariff laws shut out the goods with which they would buy our wheat and cotton and so they go naked and starving while we also suffer from a glut of what they bitterly need."

Another "remedy" suggested by those well-intentioned persons who will do anything to relieve distress but penetrate to root-causes, is "diversification of crops," and this Mr. Quick approves on general principles while perceiving its futility as a means towards economic solvency. A few more chapters are devoted to the peculiar forms of oppression suffered by the growers of flax, sugar, wool, dairy-produce, fruit and tobacco, under a system named "protection," but which, as its victims are beginning to understand, should be translated as "predatory privilege." Following upon these are three chapters dealing with the problem of transport, from which we gather that Mr. Quick reluctantly admits that he sees no possibility of its solution otherwise than by Government ownership. The hugeness of the country obviously constitutes the initial part of the problem, as the longest hauls are what must be faced by the far-distant food-producers whose goods are heavy and cheap and cannot bear high freights; and when the stock of the railway companies is controlled by capitalists whose interests lie chiefly in manufactures, it is not difficult to understand how the scales are loaded at the outset against the farmers.

But, pathetically interesting and instructive as these details undoubtedly are, we might have arrived deductively at the same conclusions by reasoning from the principles established by the New Political Economy. We know that in a city where improvements are taxed along with land, the burden always lies and always will lie too heavily on the outlying fringes and too lightly on the central areas. And a country is but a city writ large. Under the existing system the public burden will always press hardest in one form if not in another on him who is most remote from the busy centres, the farmer and the small cultivator. We know, too, that every conceivable tax or burden (one tax only excepted) has a tendency to sag downwards, to shift itself from shoulder to shoulder, until it reaches the back of him who has no one else to whom he can pass it on: and again, we should naturally expect the farmer and cultivator to be the ultimate burden-bearer of the community. It is not, therefore, by abolishing this or that glaring injustice or by modifying an economic pressure here or there, that the farmers' position will be permanently improved, but only by such a radical re-adjustment of the basis of taxation as will not only distribute the burden justly as between the populous centres of a country and its outlying parts, but will at the same time fix its incidence on that one and only form of wealth from which it cannot be shifted, but where it will, in American phraseology, "stay put": the market value of the land.

Apology is due to Mr. Quick for the foregoing paragraph, for he knows full well what is what, and sees straight to the root of "the real trouble with the

<sup>\*</sup> *THE REAL TROUBLE WITH THE FARMERS*, by Herbert Quick. The Bobbs Merrill Company, Indianapolis, U.S.A.

farmers." In one of the later chapters we read "the tendency of rising land values is to absorb all the fruits of labour except a mere living for him who produces. The vampire that sucks the blood of American farmers is land values." He gets here into grips with the real enemy, the adversary that ruined ancient Rome, that has sapped the vitality of nation after nation during the course of human history, and that now threatens the life of the most promising effort at true civilization the world has ever seen. To see and understand this is to realize the futility of playing with palliatives. To protect the homeward bound labourer from the exactions of petty thieves and pickpockets by the roadside, is pitifully poor philanthropy if the robber who takes all that remains is not removed. Yet just here we must guard against misleading analogies and similes. If the "vampire" could be thought of as a *person*, at whom we might shake a fist or to whom we could speak a bit of our mind; or a *thing*, that we could remove for ever from our midst, it would at least give some relief to our feelings. But it is neither a person nor a thing. It is the shadow or reflection of ourselves and our past blunderings. It is the Nemesis that follows error and pardons no mistakes until they are confessed and corrected. To abandon metaphor, it is the cumulative result of the age-long misjudgments into which all the peoples of the earth have fallen in their methods of raising public revenue. But though the way of transgressors is hard, the path of return to the kingdom of righteousness is always easy to the humble and unsophisticated.

Distressing and threatening as the condition of society and particularly of the farmers now is, Mr. Quick perceives with a clarity of vision worthy a devoted follower of Henry George, that the remedy is a simple one, and if properly applied will bring no pains other than the tingling irritations that accompany returning health. To abolish taxation on everything that is the result of human labour or effort, and to lay our burden of public income on the only element of value that remains, *i.e.*, the unimproved value of the land and natural resources; could any reform be more simple either theoretically or in its application? And is it possible to conceive of a reform that would be less likely to injure any human interest? Philosophers tell us that a psychological factor lies at the base of every practical problem. Mankind obey a natural and healthy instinct in following their own particular interests. Hitherto personal interests have dictated the restrictive policy that has brought us to economic chaos. Does it imply too blind a faith in our common nature if we prophesy that the change suggested in our fiscal system will divert the stream of self-interest and cause it to flow in one channel with that of the public interests, thereby sublimating or transmuting the very elements of the human mind?

Incidentally, Mr. Quick's book suggests many interesting questions such as that of the extent to which speculative, as distinct from economic, rent enters into price. It may be commended to readers at any stage of advancement in the study of economics. Though it tells a tale of woe it is illumined by the author's conviction that there remains a way of escape from the man-trap into which we have wandered. We are in it, and like to perish, because of our lack of wisdom; our deliverance will come when, as a people, we lay firm hold of the saving economic truth to which we have fallen heir. We rest in the faith that error is mortal and cannot live, while Truth is immortal and cannot die.

The leading article in this issue formed the subject of a recent Address by the writer, W. R. Lester, to the Glasgow Temperance Crusaders.

## L.C.C. ELECTION

5th March, 1925

### LEAFLETS FOR DISTRIBUTION

Our readers are reminded of the effective work that is open at any time to those who would engage in the distribution of our leaflets. In this connection, an urgent appeal is made specially to our co-workers in the London area, in view of the coming elections for the London County Council. Every opportunity should be used to organize a publicity campaign with these leaflets, by giving them away at indoor and open-air meetings or circulating them from house to house over a wide neighbourhood. It is the one thing that anyone can do to force the issue of Land Value Taxation to the forefront, prompt questions to Candidates, and educate fellow voters.

Let us know how many leaflets you can take so that something *more* may be known about the Taxation of Land Values in your vicinity and public opinion be awakened to its urgency. As we have explained in previous appeals to join in such active and telling effort, it is easy to get assistance in the distribution. Any troop of boys will gladly assist in your "adventure." The thing is to get busy at once.

The leaflets are available free of charge and orders for parcels of 500 or 1,000 or more should be sent to the United Committee, 11, Tothill Street, S.W.1., and to the English League, 376-7, Strand, W.C.2, for the following:—

#### *United Committee Leaflets*

- No. 21: HOW TO RAISE WAGES.
- No. 22: THE GREAT RATE SCANDAL.
- No. 23: IDLE LAND AND IDLE MEN.
- No. 24: A WORD TO CONSERVATIVES.
- No. 26: WHAT THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER HAS SAID. Mr. Churchill on the Taxation of Land Values.

#### *English League Leaflets*

- No. 15: THE WOMAN VOTER AND THE LAND QUESTION.
- No. 17: HOLDING AND WITHHOLDING.
- No. 18: LONDON LAND VALUES AND LONDON RATES.
- No. 19: TO CO-OPERATORS.
- No. 20: WHAT WE ALL WANT AND HOW TO GET IT.

Funds are wanted to provide for the cost of printing and publishing these leaflets, and the best way to make contribution, apart from special donations, is to accompany orders with a remittance corresponding in your opinion to the needs of the case and your desire to see this good work well done.

Write now for a complete assortment of the leaflets and choose which you would like to distribute.

The effect of fox-hunting on arable farming in Cheshire was alluded to on 7th January by Mr. P. Sandbach, of Liverpool, at the resumed conference of the Union of University Liberal Societies at Edinburgh. Mr. Sandbach said hunting had far-reaching effects in Cheshire. The landlord would not sell part of his land to a stranger, because that stranger might put up notices prohibiting hounds crossing his land.

An Oxford delegate asked if he was to understand that land could not be cultivated in Cheshire because the foxes were running. Mr. Sandbach said it was not a case of being unable to cultivate the land because of the fox, but it affected fundamentally the agriculture of the district. Arable farming was not encouraged in his district on account of the fact that the hounds could not cross over the young corn.—LIVERPOOL POST, 8th January.