

THE LANDED GENTRY - 1962

By BOYCE RICHARDSON

By permission of the *Montreal Star* we reprint (slightly abridged) the following article which appeared in their issues of February 15 and 16.

DEATH duties in Britain are among the highest in the world and it is generally accepted abroad that this punitive system of taxation has destroyed the big landowners and broken their political power. This is supposed to be one element of the social revolution that followed the last war and brought great changes in British life. That, anyway, is the theory; but what facts are available suggest a far more subtle and less revolutionary process has been at work than most people realise.



It is true that the big landowners of the country — most of them hereditary owners — have been chipped and whittled at throughout this century. But in spite of this they have survived triumphantly and in 1962 landlords still own considerably more than half the agricultural land in Britain.

The facts are indeed difficult to come by because, apart from two surveys made since the war at the request of F.A.O., almost no up-to-date information has been collected about who owns Britain.

The Modern Domesday Book of 1877 showed that some 27,000,000 of England's 30,000,000 acres were held in estates. Of this, about 12,000,000 acres were owned by the 2,512 "great landowners" with more than 3,000 acres each and an annual rented income of £3,000. Peers held more than 5,000,000 acres, and 318 landowners at that time enjoyed a rental income of more than £20,000 a year (a great fortune in those days). Scotland was even more firmly under the control of landowners, with more than 16,000,000 of its 18,000,000 acres held by only 375 big landlords.

As the twentieth century appeared, 89 per cent. of agricultural land in England and Wales was still occupied by tenants. The country landowner at that time employed, housed, fed and maintained the entire village. He compelled villagers to go to church, where the agent read the lesson, and the tenants sat in the pews behind the gentry and tipped their hats to the squire as they left. But the landowners, who had maintained their enormous political influence, were under pressure. When in 1907 they formed an association to defend their interests,

100 of their first 1,000 members were M.P.s. Just three years later the landlords combined to block in the House of Lords a bill to increase death duties and to tax land values. This led to the final curbing of the power of the Lords, and was the beginning of the end of the political domination of Britain by the landowners.

A government survey in the early years of the last war showed that 67 per cent. of the agricultural land was occupied by tenants. When a survey was made for F.A.O. in 1950 this percentage had fallen to 62; the 1960 F.A.O. survey is not yet published, but will presumably show a further decline in tenancies. But even these figures do not give an accurate idea of the holdings of landlords, for most of the bigger estates also have large holdings "in hand," as they say, which they farm themselves.

MORE EFFICIENT

The heavy death duties and high taxation have forced the big landowners to become more efficient. Between the wars, many hereditary estates were held by dilettante farmers, who pursued a huntin' and shootin' course through life, with interludes for the London Season. They invested little, and lived on a declining rental income.

Now most of these have to work, or at least put their capital to work. They are in business in a big way. The best of them have drawn up plans for "rationalising" production on their estates, for consolidating the size of tenant holdings, and eliminating inefficient holdings as the tenancies expire. But a 45 per cent. abatement of estate duties, granted by Sir Stafford Cripps in 1949, has saved many estates from complete liquidation.

LANDOWNERS HOLD THEIR POSITION

The biggest landowner in Britain today is the Church of England, which has a rental income from property of £5,500,000.

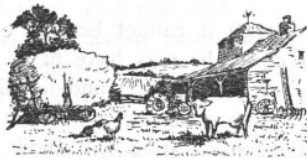


In the last 10 years the Church has bought into the more lucrative type of real estate — offices, shops and factories — in a big way. Its residential properties are now mainly concentrated in the better-class districts of

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disappearance of our hitherto highly satisfactory British market. What is not recognised or not commented on, is that our basic trouble is high land prices and heavy mortgages, geared to an assured market and good prices for farm produce. Unless New Zealand can find equivalent markets quickly, it will be the old story of rent taking too large a share of the returns, and labour and capital, at least in marginal cases, having to cease production with the usual results of economic disruption and unemployment.

Looked at from the New Zealand consumer's point of view, we have been fortunate in that a large volume of British goods have been allowed in free of duty on a *quid pro quo* basis. It seems probable that if Britain does join the Common Market British goods will be both dearer and scarcer here. It also appears to me that England will be losing much of the trade of a very good customer.



We New Zealanders are well fed, but I can't help wondering how the E.C.M. will appear to the 1,500 million people who, according to a recent report, Freedom and Hunger, are living on an inadequate diet. Certainly not as a move to help them. Must it not rather seem a confirmation that Western Europe is interested only in its own economic gains? Will capital not be made of this point by those seeking to further Communism?

Looking at the E.C.M. more generally, I do deplore its establishment on the grounds that far from being a step towards free world trade I see it as yet another bulwark for protectionism . . . as another large group (the U.S.A. is already one) cutting themselves off permanently and denying to others permanently, the advantages of really free world trade.

Yours faithfully,

BETTY NOBLE

Wellington, New Zealand.

JOHN WILSON SENIOR

We regret to announce the death of John Wilson Snr., on March 18. His son Mr. John Wilson writes:

"His long and earnest life had as its political expression a burning faith in the liberal outlook; and his continuing discoveries of the soundness of the Henry George philosophy kept him young and eager for the success of the movement."

These words will be endorsed by all who knew him. To his family we tender sincere sympathy.

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London, and 28,500 freehold properties in poorer districts have been sold to their tenants since 1956. The Church also owns 210,000 acres of farms — probably twice as many as the next highest country landlord — spread through 38 English counties, occupied by 2,200 tenants.

TITLED LANDOWNERS

Other big corporate landowners are the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, the London hospitals, and the Crown and Forestry Commissioners. But the hereditary landowners such as the Dukes of Northumberland, Marlborough, Devonshire, Norfolk and Buccleuch are also still going strong.

But how strong? Some examples do give an idea. The Duke of Northumberland, for instance, owned 180,000 acres in northern England until after the First World War. This land had been in his family for as long as England had had a history, almost. And today he still owns 98,000 acres.

The Duke has 3,500 tenants — 207 of them farmers working more than 50 acres. He employs 200 people to manage his estates, and himself farms 12,600 acres.

The experience of the Dukes of Marlborough and Devonshire in this century is probably even more typical of what has happened to landowners in Britain.

The Duke of Marlborough came by his Blenheim estate in 1702 as a grant from Queen Anne. Ten generations have since lived there; by the beginning of the century the estate comprised 19,000 acres, but today it is down to 11,500 acres, of which the Duke himself farms, 1,300 acres. The other 10,000 acres are occupied by 42 tenants with holdings of from 15 to 750 acres each. Before the war the central farm was handed over to one of the tenants, who used it as rough pasture. Today it is a thriving farm, and the gross sales of the estate have increased three times in the last ten years.

RICHER THAN BEFORE

This is the sort of slow whittling away that has occurred to many of the big estates; but instead of destroying the landed families these pressures have forced them to become more efficient in managing their estates, and have possibly left them today richer than they were before the war.

The Duke of Devonshire, at the beginning of the century, had 200,000 acres and was one of the biggest landowners in Britain. His holdings were spread through 14 counties, including 89,000 acres in Derbyshire, where his Chetworth estate still is. Today that estate has more than 200 farms of more than 100 acres, it has 4,000 acres of sheep-grazing land, 4,000 acres of woodland and 2,000 acres of parkland that is "in hand", farmed by the Duke himself.

Considering that 40 years ago many landowners were beginning to regard nationalisation of their land as almost inevitable, the landed interests in Britain have maintained their position with remarkable skill and tenacity.