

ENGLISH HUSBANDRY.

TWO ESSAYS IN THE NEW STATECRAFT¹

Of all goods which can be privately owned, none is more conformable to the teaching of *Rerum Novarum* than the land, the plot of earth on which the family lives and from the fruits of which, wholly or in part, it draws its livelihood. . . Only the stability which has its roots in the land privately owned, makes the family the most perfect and fertile living cell of society, causing as it does a coherent continuity between present and future.'—Pius XII., Whitsuntide, 1941.

For one whose training has been mainly historical, to review two books on the land might seem a misapplication of industry. But, as John Selden said, 'most men's learning is nothing but history duly taken up'; and it is their historical grasp of what agriculture has meant and must mean to civilization that renders Sir George Stapledon's work and Mr. Rolf Gardiner's important. England to whom agriculture has come to signify merely an industry with a snag in it—the least effective of all the many extant methods of exploiting humanity—must listen to such men or die. Their 'history duly taken up' allies them to that of many papal pronouncements, which they—more than any English Catholics, except a handful of Distributists—have done their best to implement.

Sir George Stapledon, whose reclamation of grass-lands is world-famous, has found time to become one of the land's foremost evangelists. He now annotates and enlarges on the agricultural programme of one of England's most far-sighted statesmen. That Disraeli was never in a position to carry out the land policy he urged, was a national disaster which *Disraeli and the New Age* bewails and explains. The policy, however, is there to be reconstructed. And that is where Sir George Stapledon comes in.

England, he says, is nothing if not robust, independent, adventurous—and the mainspring of these qualities is the land. We want statesmen—not politicians—men whose principles are based on the needs of human nature in its entirety: and such a man was Disraeli. Disraeli had, inevitably, to educate his party and his nation; and he strove, with might and main, to check the materialistic bent of both. 'What you want to achieve,' he said, 'is the cheapest. . . but the wealth of England is not merely material wealth. . . We

¹ *Disraeli and the New Age*, by Sir George Stapledon. (Faber; 10s. 6d.).
England Herself, by Rolf Gardiner. (Faber; 8s. 6d.).

have a more precious treasure and that is the character of our people. That is what you have injured.' He anticipated the rotten core of industrialism while those about him were still congratulating themselves on its exuberant blossoms. 'The commercial principle now rules the country. . . If you convert the senate into a counting house, it will not be long before the nation degenerates into a factory.' This prophetic gift of his embraced even the latest encroachments of the totalitarian state in England. For he saw that local responsibility, family life, and individual freedom were threatened. 'England should think more of the country and less of the government.' 'The value of a custom is its flexibility, and that adapts itself to all the circumstances of the moment and the locality.' 'It is private life that governs the world.'

Turning from these general precepts to the particular role of the land, Disraeli saw farming as 'the only sound basis of the social fabric,' and the home market as 'the most important element in the consideration of our public wealth.' He warned the nation that if they were 'to be involved in a European war,' it would be the height of folly to rely on imported food. But this was less ominous than the disappearance of the men of the land, men who had always stood for 'the spirit of liberty and order.'

The commercial aims of his opponents he impugned as both crimes and blunders. 'You cannot have free trade unless the person with whom you deal is as liberal as yourself.' 'The Continent will not suffer England to be the workshop of the world.'

Planners were abhorrent to Disraeli. Speaking on his Agricultural Holding Bill, he said: 'Permissive legislature is the character of a free people. It is easy to adopt compulsory legislation when you have to deal with those who only exist to obey; but in a free country. . . like England, you must trust to persuasion and example.'

It must not be thought, however, that Sir George Stapledon's book consists solely of the aphorisms in which he has allowed Disraeli to speak for himself. His commentaries and amplifications—which bring Disraeli's Victorian wisdom *en rapport* with our own age—are themselves of extreme value. Sir George's view of history is naturally more anthropological than Disraeli's. It is axiomatic with him that the human animal is turning his world pasture into a world desert by soil erosion; that specialisation of employment per unit of area is in itself an evil; that the material age is perishing in anguish at the hands of the machines it has created; and that regimentation of body and soul is the worst evil man can endure. 'Standardize and regimentalize education,' he says, 'and we shall have dealt the most deadly of all possible blows to . . . posterity.' Through-

out his book, the countryman's independence of character and stability of habit, are contrasted with Big Business's prime need, the mass-produced mind of 'mobile labour.' 'Adventure and contemplation share our being like night and day.'

Adventure and contemplation are the main theme of *England Herself*; and Mr. Rolf Gardiner's momentous book also confirms—his quoted comment is a German's—that 'the historical sense of the English is the soil of their patriotism.' The adventure and contemplation recorded in *England Herself* have been directed not only towards the redemption of a derelict estate, but towards the education of a band of young disciples. This education, English in its traditional origins, was largely inspired by Dutch, Scandinavian and German examples; and it is interesting to note—when we have swallowed so many totalitarian hooks ourselves—how cleverly the Springhead Ring succeeded in carrying off the bait while avoiding the barb.

The first notion of a small eager community redeeming its own corner of England came from the North Riding, where a stout-hearted countryside had seen its agriculture jettisoned for iron mines and the mines themselves closed when they no longer 'paid.' The region had a culture of its own which embraced whippet-racing, singing in chapel choirs, mummers' plays and sword-dancing; and when the mines closed, a local squire produced enthusiasm and capital for subsistence holdings. Friends came to help; and in 1931 Mr. Gardiner organised a festival tour, of Cleveland singers, dancers and players, which went far afield—ultimately to the Ruhr and Silesia—to enhance both its own enjoyment and that of its hosts. The miners of the Ruhr returned the visits of the miners of Cleveland, until the policy of the Nazi party wrote *finis* to such overtures. The idea throughout was that art should not be professional and imported but social and indigenous.

Meanwhile the miners' visiting sympathizers became summer camps of young enthusiasts. One of the miners observed, apropos of the work of Byland, Rievaulx and Guisborough in the Middle Ages, 'We must be the modern monks,' and it was the guests of the 'modern monks' who spread their agricultural and spiritual gospel. Later, when rearmament reopened the Cleveland industries, the centre of gravity shifted to Wessex; and it was mainly on Mr. Gardiner's own estates, Springhead and Gore Farm near Shaftesbury, that the experiment described in *England Herself* continued and continues.

The purpose of the Springhead camps, held at mid-winter, Easter and Harvest, was threefold: to demonstrate a form of balanced training; to build up a permanent regional centre for it on a model

rural estate; and to train selected men, from different walks of life, as the leaders of the future. In 1928 the out-buildings of Gore Farm, which had been burnt down, were rebuilt by local labour with local materials; and camps of seventy men or so came to aid a small permanent staff of experts and to learn as they worked. They paid 10/- a week towards their keep; and the cost of their excellent home-grown food averaged 7/- in 1934-6; which goes to show that good fresh food need not be costly. Music was the soul of the camps: folk-songs, rounds, chorales—with excerpts from Byrd's masses for Sundays. These latter were subsequently sung in many parish churches of the neighbourhood. Such a programme needs youth for its execution—and the best of youth. One has only to contrast Mr. Gardiner's book with, say, the Carnegie Report on Land Settlement of 1935, to note a radical cleavage between Springhead ideals and those of official experts. It is presumed by the latter that 'if there were no unemployment there would be no movement to place people on the land'; and statistics gloomily enumerate the down-and-out urban workers and ex-soldiers who failed to flourish on English soil, even when subsidised. Springhead's aims were necessarily aristocratic. They were unconcerned with class distinctions as such. One becomes aristocratic by doing aristocratic things—above all by giving rather than taking. Springhead stood for the 'responsibility, religion and permanence' of country life. Not for a bewildered 'industry' at the beck and call of proletarian economics.

With the war, however, mass-produced agriculture spat on its hands and got going. It was, as A. G. Street says in *Hitler's Whistle*, sound national defence but not good farming. It took what it could of stored fertility out of the fields, with less adequate replacement than ever; and it fought, incidentally, against the maximum self-sufficiency and balanced cropping of the subsistence farmer. Dorset Downs disappeared; for sheep cannot be mechanized, though they are the best guarantee of fertility on chalk. The author's exhilarating attempt to start a regional scheme for flax-production was steam-rollered by a centrally administered 'industry' with its inevitable degradation of growers, processors, spinners, weavers, and the flax itself.

Yet these frustrated experiments have their reassuring side; because if human zest can survive the planner, what has once been done may be done again. Moreover there are other Springhead activities, the planting of Cranborne Chase, for example, which has been less thwarted and diverted. Never has a book had more to teach those who would see young men 'redeem the wilderness of England and in the effort redeem their own souls.'

The present writer has endeavoured to interest a Catholic public in two outstanding examples of the new statesmanship for several reasons. Others, Catholics might note, are taking a far greater part than they, in work which, by reason of Papal emphasis and the clamour of our own needs, should be urgently our own. For although the land of England matters more to the Christian than to anyone else, most of us are not only ignoring its appeal but helping to frustrate it.

It should not need Papal exhortations—though Papal exhortations have not been lacking—to point out that a family has a better chance, spiritually and materially, in the country than in the town; and that even if England continues to ruin her land in favour of her export trade, ‘there is a world elsewhere.’

Yet—how unlike the day when Cistercians colonized the wilderness!—Catholics are netted, even against their wishes, for the towns, by the fact that such jungle outposts of the Faith as exist in more avowedly savage countries, are very often lacking in the jungle that is England. It is a sorry sight to see poor Catholics tramp and cycle, Sunday after Sunday, to the nearest town; to a long Sung Mass in the middle of the morning or to Low Mass and Communion in the dark. Meanwhile the fire goes out, the animals are unfed, the dinner is uncooked, the beds are unmade; and to this they come back on their sole day for family life and recreation. One feels that a little of the consideration shown to visiting troops—the afternoon Mass, perhaps, on the Eve of the Feast?—might be shown to the weary Atlas who bears the whole world on his shoulders—the man who grows the food.

HELEN PARRY EDEN.

YOUR VILLAGE AND MINE. By C. H. Gardiner. (Faber; 7s. 6d.)

This is an easy-going and conversational kind of book on the English countryside, covering in some detail the general activities, the social life and the present problems of modern villagers. The author hopes for a prosperous rural England which will keep the best traditions while adopting cheerfully a great measure of modernisation and ‘progress.’ His thought does not cut deep, and he seems to underestimate the danger of drowning the baby in the company’s bath water, but he shows a real respect for the countryman and approaches everything controversial with modesty and good humour. The reviewer, a ‘rural purist’ in Mr. Gardiner’s phrase, is debarred from more serious criticism by the sincerity and unpretentiousness of the book.

W.S.