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A Question of Wheat

FOREWORD.

The following paper forms yet another answer to the question Can Britain Feed Herself? This question, which I have repeatedly answered in various ways already, becomes increasingly pressing with the loss of foreign markets, the deepening misery of the people engaged in the declining export trades, and the mounting burden of unemployment pay and poor law relief.

If I were Minister of Agriculture I should convene a meeting of farmers and point out that Flanders produces £20 worth of produce per acre from sand dunes, as compared with £4 worth per acre from the superior land of Britain; that Guernsey feeds 1400 persons to the square mile, mostly with home-grown food, as compared with 390 per square mile in Britain, only a third of whom are fed on home-grown food; that potatoes in Britain average six tons to the acre, as compared with as high a figure as 31 tons in Minnesota and 40 tons in Germany; that with us hay averages 1½ tons to the acre, as compared with 8 tons to 16 tons in France, and 56 tons of green ryegrass to the acre produced by Sir John Lawes at Craigentenny; that 14 and 15 tons of beet per acre are good for England, but that Germany long since raised 75 to 110 tons, and that Mr. Champion at Whitby, helped by sewage, grew 150,000 to 200,000 lbs. of beetroot to the acre (or some 89 ton); that 2000 gallon cows are now common, and that Brooklands Barbara's yield is at the rate of 3640 gallons a-year, but that many farmers still keep cows giving a yield of less than a tenth of that. And if I were the Minister of Agriculture I would ask: What about it all? Can't we get a move on generally so that the worst farms may approximate a little more towards the output of the best?

If I were the Minister charged with the duty of coping with unemployment I would attend the conference and I would say to the country and small-town folk, If you cannot find work for your sons and daughters at home, you will require to limit your birthrate, for we cannot continue to shoulder the burden caused by the influx of your surplus population. The community that cannot maintain its own children should stop breeding.

A Question of Wheat:

BEING A TRAVERSAL OF A FUNDAMENTAL DELUSION.

Every newspaper reader must have been struck with the occasional, and for that matter frequent, displays of ignorance by judges on the bench and Cabinet ministers in a scarcely less degree. Thus Mr. Churchill and Philip Snowden, with many joining in the cry, keep saying that Britain cannot feed her present population. And their whole attitude on public questions is vitiated by this view. We need, they say, colonies for our surplus population, markets for our surplus goods, and imports to make good our food shortage, with, of course, a navy and an army to protect our colonial territory and our shipping.

The basic statement is wildly untrue, and can be disproved from the simplest facts, readily ascertainable from the Year Books.

The Elements of the Question.

Whether Britain can feed herself or not is a question of population, acreage, and the growing-capacity of that acreage.

There are in Great Britain, Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the Channel Islands, 47½ millions of population.

The acreage of these units of the British Homeland is 77,683,084. Of this there were under cultivation in 1916 only 31,849,590 acres. That year is chosen because it represents a high figure of British cultivated land, being one of the war years, when much 'permanent' pasture was broken up. All of it (and more) has gone back, not merely to grass, but to 'permanent' grass. In Essex alone (where Mr. Churchill's own constituency is situated) it is reported that 14,000 acres have reverted to grass within the past agricultural year. Many Scots farmers have taken over farms abandoned in Essex as being worked out, and Mr. Macneilage, the redoubtable editor of *The Scottish Farmer*, says he has never known, or read, or heard of any of these migrants who failed to make their holdings pay. At one time Essex wheat was so notable that it was in demand abroad as seed.

The full error of Mr. Churchill's statement, however, is not made manifest till we find that of even this war-acreage of cultivated land, only 6,996,558 acres were devoted to 'corn crops' - that is, wheat, barley, and oats. 'Green crops' (including potatoes, turnips, carrots, etc.) occupied only 2,774,928 acres; and to 'pasture' was devoted the enormous total of 21,565,337 acres out of the 31 millions cultivated.

Thus there were still, even in the war years, 46 million acres of which, apart from forests and the small percentage devoted to buildings, yards, etc., no use was made.

Wheat.

I do not suppose Mr. Churchill has ever seen these figures. Certainly he cannot have paused to consider their significance, or he would surely have thought it worth his while to point out how it is that with 46 millions of acres uncultivated, and 13 hundred thousand registered unemployed, we nevertheless cannot grow our own wheat supply.

Whether or not Britain can feed herself is usually said to resolve itself into a question of wheat. We cannot, it is said, grow wheat to advantage.

It is not as if wheat were not grown to advantage in Britain. We do grow it, even in the Highlands of Scotland. In 1925 we grew 7,000,000 quarters of it, and the estimate for 1926 was the same figure. But while we produced only seven millions, we imported 22 million quarters that year, with four million sacks of flour in addition.

How does that compare with other old, peopled lands? France the same year grew 41 million quarters of 480 lbs.; and imported only 5 million quarters of wheat and no wheat flour. Italy, fairly densely peopled, grew 30 million quarters and imported 10 millions, with no (recorded) imports of wheat flour, while she grew at the same time 13 million quarters of maize, of which Britain imported 8 million quarters, producing none herself.

Of barley Britain produced 6 million quarters and imported 6 millions. Of oats she raised 17 as compared with France's 32 million quarters, while the French production of barley was the same as ours - 6 millions.

Thus France produces, for her smaller population, and in addition to vast quantities of wine, of root crops, and of fruit and garden stuff, 87 million quarters of grain to our 30 millions, and this on land said to be less suitable for wheat than ours.

In striking contrast to the waste of land in Britain, I give the following table showing how the land of Germany is turned to account. It is from the article on Germany in the tenth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. XXVIII., p. 685:-

Arable (including gardens) . . .	. . .	48.6	per cent.
Vineyards	. . .	0.3	"
Meadows	. . .	10.9	"
Pasture grounds	. . .	5.3	"
Woods and forests	. . .	25.8	"
		<hr/>	
Cultivated	. . .	90.9	"

Houses and yards	...	...	0.9	”
Uncultivable	...	...	3.8	”
Roads, streams, lakes	...	...	4.4	”
			100.0	”

This, however, was in the year 1902. Germany also has been caught into the ‘tomfoolery of industrialism,’ and her rural population is also hiving off to the cities.

Custom.

Is it, then, that we cannot grow wheat to advantage, or is it merely that we will not? I say that in these matters we are ruled by fashion, convention.

The Scots farmer grows oats because all his neighbours grow oats. His rotation (‘shift’ he calls it) made no provision for wheat in the days when he took his farm from a landlord and the established rotation with it, and now, although in many cases he is his own landlord, he does not alter the shift except to lay more of his land down in grass.

Wheat is a more profitable grain than oats. Last time I looked the prices, they were 24s. for oats and 45s. for wheat.

It is true that wheat is imported in large quantities, and at preferential rates, from Canada and the Argentine. It is true also that rent and manure are a comparatively negligible quantity with American and Canadian farmers, whereas on good Scots farms the manure bill is reckoned to equal the rent.

The Waste on Freights.

But what of the per contra? The Canadian wheat is costing at present 14s. a-ton to bring it across the Atlantic from Montreal to U.K. ports. The Argentine rate runs as high as 28/3. Australian rates, not now quoted publicly, will be much higher. And the foreign grain had to pay rail freights before it was shipped, plus the expenses of the wheat pools that handled and stored it previous to shipment. There are often inland rail freights at this end also: the mills and warehouses are not all in port towns.

These extras should go some way to protect the British farmer. And they do protect him so far. If he grew no wheat at all we should believe that it was impossible to produce it as a business proposition. But he grows it and sells it at nearly twice the price of oats, and whatever is worth doing is usually worth doing well.

Best Wheat Lands at Home.

These are aspects of the wheat question that one never sees discussed. Thus 28 bushels to the acre are reckoned a good yield in Canada, whereas 50 bushels are common in England, 56 quite often, and 40 in Scotland. With specialists in wheat production, such as the star farmers of France, Belgium, and Germany, as many as nine quarters to the acre are produced - seed selection and wheat-breeding being still in their earlier stages. Long ago 80 bushels to the acre were spoken of as the ideal. A friend of mine tells me he produces 13 quarters of oats, but complains that with so heavy a crop he is at the mercy of a spell of rain. The wheat producer surmounts this difficulty by producing a thicker-stemmed plant.

The *average* position as regards the production of wheat was surely attained long ago by the world-renowned wheat farm at Sawbridgeworth, upon which, on a large scale, wheat was grown from 1861 continuously, returning a clear profit of £3 per acre - this with an average of only four quarters an acre.

I have spoken of star farms. Some of the results with hand-planted wheat make such figures as the foregoing look foolish. Kropotkin cites the case of a patch of land at Tomblaine, in France, on which 82 bushels were in one year grown upon the twentieth part of an acre - a patch 47 feet square. These results remind us of the weight of grain produced by General Sir Arthur Cotton on hand-planted wheat.

But I must not convey the impression that any kind of fancy farming is required to feed the population of Britain from her 77 million acres. Long before the war the authorities said that 13 million acres of good arable land had been allowed to lapse from cultivation, and certainly the amount has been greatly increased since then. Oliver Goldsmith was not only country born and bred, but he loved to go down into the country to write, and in 'The Deserted Village' he wrote -

A time there was, ere England's griefs began,

When every rood of ground maintained its man.

If the fourth part of an acre did it in the middle of the eighteenth century, surely we have an infinite margin to-day, by comparison, with seven roods per person, and many artificial fertilisers unknown in Goldsmith's day.

Britain not Densely Peopled.

To silence the politicians, and above all to encourage farmers really to believe in their calling, it ought to be enough to point to accomplished facts.

Britain has a population of only 390 per square mile.

Belgium and Saxony, both highly industrial States, feed 600 to the square mile, mostly with home-grown food, and Flanders takes an average of £20 worth of produce per acre per annum out of land that was lately salt-marshes and sand dunes, as compared with an average of £4 per acre from the naturally superior land of Britain.

I have already frequently cited the cases of Jersey and Guernsey, with populations of 1300 and 1400 respectively to the square mile, fed upon home-grown food, and exporting food heavily in addition. They have a comparatively sunless autumn, and the soil is naturally pulverised granite, which has been *made* to bear the crops it does.

I will no more than mention China's population of 3000 to the square mile, fed upon home-grown food, and exporting soya beans, tea, and rice, and this without artificial manures and only the most primitive implements of husbandry.

The Facts Surprise everybody.

All arguments for the maintenance of the existing system based on the theory that Britain must export manufactures and import the bulk of her food are used by people who are quite surprised when you cite such facts and figures. Universally the facts seem to have the charm of novelty to them.

But that is the least part of their charm. Their real attractiveness lies in the guarantee they give that when, and as gradually, Britain loses her markets abroad she may and should gradually turn her land to account for the raising of those £400,000,000 worth of food which she imports from countries not always more naturally fertile or favoured than the old, rich lands of our sadly-neglected heritage, the United Kingdom.

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