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COMMON LAND AND INCLOSURE

E. C. K. GONNER

with a new introduction by

G. E. MINGAY



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INTRODUCTION TO SECOND EDITION

by G. E. MINGAY

PROFESSOR GONNER'S book, here reprinted after more than fifty years, belongs to a period remarkable for its scholarly and influential contributions to English agrarian history. The richness of that time is amply exemplified by the names of Maitland, Vinogradoff, Gay, Leadam and Gray, to mention but a few of the most distinguished, and may be further illustrated by the appearance in the one year of 1912 alone, not only of Gonner's authoritative study, but also of Ernle's well-known *English Farming Past and Present*, and not less important, Tawney's celebrated masterpiece, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*. These works were among the finest fruit of a strongly-rooted historical growth stretching back to Thorold Rogers' pioneer work in the 1860's, one vigorous branch of which had come to concern itself very largely with the problem of the decline of the English peasantry.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there culminated a long-developing discussion of agricultural problems, and at the centre of this lay the situation of the English agricultural labourers. It was at this time, for instance, that Rider Haggard set down the story of his rural perambulations. Haggard surveyed and discussed the farming scene with members of every class of rural society, and among his accounts of farm practices, rents, and prices, the labour problem loomed large. In a typical

encounter Lord Coventry told him that skilled men, always scarce in Worcestershire, "had grown still scarcer, as the young able-bodied men were leaving for the towns, whither they were attracted by the higher wages and the seductions of city life." And again in Essex Haggard met an old labourer whose memories went back to the Crimean war and beyond. In those days he lived on bread and onions, washed down with small beer, and his wife produced in lieu of tea a beverage made by soaking a burnt crust of bread in boiling water. With such a record it was not surprising, said Haggard, that "resentment against past sufferings, at any rate as yet, is deeper than gratitude for present benefits."¹

Other writers also attempted to provide systematic factual material for the discussion of the problem. In 1911 F. G. Heath followed up his account of the labourers' conditions of 1873, when the first widely-organized agricultural labourers' unions were appearing, with a new and more detailed analysis that covered wages, allowances in kind, hours of work, and housing, in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, as well as England.² And between his two volumes appeared the first *Report* by the Board of Trade on the *Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom*.³

Books which dealt with the social problems of rural life were not lacking. Among them were F. E. Green's *Tyranny of the Countryside* (1913), and Georges Bourne's *Change in the Village* (1912), a sympathetic study of Surrey country life which found the labourer hanging "between two civilizations", emerging from the reeking poverty of the old days, but not yet integrated into twentieth-century society. William Savage's *Rural Housing* (1915) lit up an aspect of

¹ H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England* (1902), pp. 363, 458-9, Haggard's interest in the land question continued, and in 1905 he published his pamphlet *Back to the Land*, and a report on the Salvation Army land colonies, *The Poor and the Land*. In 1913 appeared his study of a successful peasant agriculture: *Rural Denmark and its Lessons*.

² F. G. Heath, *The English Peasantry (1874); British Rural Life and Labour (1911)*.

³ Cmd. 346 (1900).

the countryside which had helped to stimulate the migration and unionism of the 1870's, and Joseph Arch's autobiography put that era into its social and political context.¹ In a more romantic reaching back into the past came W. H. Hudson's picturesque tales,² and for a superficially attractive picture of the countryside at the onset of the great depression one might turn to the limpid prose of Richard Jeffries.³

In parliament and the press, radicals presented the case for land reform, and the vans of the political parties decked in their appropriate distinguishing colours quartered the countryside, as Hudson said, and might be found in the remotest villages. "Their words--wild and whirling words they may be--are sinking into the hearts of the agricultural labourers of the new generation."⁴ The flight from the land, the rural migration to towns and overseas, had reached a peak in the 1870's and 1880's, and still created much alarm. Belated improvements in wages, housing, schools, and allotments could do little to stem the tide, and when it eventually subsided at the end of the century this was merely because most of the unfettered and enterprising had already gone. "Fewer potential migrants were being born, because the parents who might have reared them had already migrated."⁵

The basic factor in the labourer's poverty and unrest, it was widely argued, was his landlessness. The labourer had become divorced from the soil on which he worked, and while it was true that at this time most labourers had a vegetable garden or access as a tenant to an allotment or potato patch, this was a mere supplement to his inadequate wages, an amelioration of his lot and not a share, by right, in the land itself. It gave him no great measure of independence or security. The labourer could only be

¹ *Joseph Arch: The Story of his Life, Told by Himself*, ed. the Countess of Warwick (1898).

² See for example his *A Shepherd's Life* (1910).

³ See R. Jeffries, *Field and Farm*, ed. S. J. Looker (1957).

⁴ Hudson, op. cit. (14th ed. 1933), p. 77.

⁵ A. Cairncross, "Internal Migration in Victorian England", in Cairncross, *Home and Foreign Investment 1870-1913* (1953), p. 75.

