

**AN AGRICULTURAL
FAGGOT. A COLLECTION
OF PAPERS ON
AGRICULTURAL SUBJECTS**

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An agricultural faggot. A collection of papers on agricultural subjects by R. H. Rew

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R. H. REW

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AGRICULTURAL SUBJECTS.*

BY
R. H. REW, C.B.

WESTMINSTER:
P. S. KING & SON
ORCHARD HOUSE.

1913.

1925
R32a

INTRODUCTION.

LIBRARY SETS

DEC 16 1940

HARDING

THIS is a bundle of sticks—slightly trimmed to lie more conveniently in the faggot—gathered from various hedgerows, where many of them have long remained undisturbed. In plainer phrase, this book contains a selection from papers on agricultural subjects written at varying intervals during the past five and twenty years and published in the transactions of the associations to whose members they were primarily addressed. Some carry the marks of their date and already have a flavour of antiquity, but the subjects with which they deal are perennial, and even the late-Victorian aspect of them is not quite out of date. It is hoped, at any rate, that they still possess some interest for those who are concerned for the well-being of Agriculture—a category which happily includes many more than those who actually live by the land.

Glancing back over the period covered by the contents of this book—the earliest paper was written in 1888—the superficial impression is one of changing times. The last quarter of the nineteenth century comprised years of tribulation for owners and occupiers of land. Farmers who in

the later "eighties" were recovering a little from the staggering blows of the early years of the decade were confronted with still heavier buffeting in the "nineties." To many a man who had struggled through the "eighties," the "nineties" gave the *coup de grâce*. In reporting on the state of agriculture in Norfolk in 1894, I stated: "At the date of the Richmond Commission (1880-82) the 'good times' had been left behind for some years, but ever since then matters have gone from bad to worse, and in spite of transient gleams of hopefulness the dark cloud of depression has become blacker and blacker, until a positive gloom has fallen over the face of the country. Old families are gone, old houses are shut up or let to strangers, old acres are abandoned, or are owned or occupied by new men. Steadily, relentlessly, the depression deepened and spread, until the season of 1893 and 1894 aggravated and accentuated the trouble with startling suddenness."¹ What was true of Norfolk was true in more or less degree of many other districts of England. Like vessels on a long voyage, farmers who had survived the earlier gales, with strained timbers and torn canvas, were unable to weather the later hurricane. But though storms arise and vessels founder, the sea remains always changeful yet always the same, and the tides ebb and flow in eternal sequence. So also, through

¹ Report on Norfolk to the Royal Commission on Agriculture. C. 7915.

the fluctuations of the years prosperity and adversity come to the farmers, some succeed and others fail, but from one generation to another seed time and harvest, summer and winter, continue, and the cultivation of the soil goes on. The land remains, and those who till it, though outwardly different, are kindred in spirit with their forefathers. Endurance is the badge of all their tribe.

It is well that the community should have a sympathetic regard for those who till the soil, and that the State should anxiously consider the welfare of agriculturalists. But beyond the interests of individuals, above even the interests of the present generation, is the interest of the Land itself. There is much in the history of agriculture in this country which may be criticised ; its progress has not been achieved without hardship, and oftentimes injustice, to individuals, but, whatever may have been the defects in our land system, it has on the whole been successful in making and maintaining the fertility of the land. A similar result might no doubt have been attained under another system, but it is undeniable that the restrictions devised by owners to prevent the deterioration of the land—hardly as they pressed on enterprising and competent tenants who were willing to farm fairly—had on the whole the effect of preserving soil fertility. Freedom of cultivation is admirable when every occupier is skilled and conscientious, but, without reflecting on the

present generation, it must be admitted that all farmers could not at all times be so described. Landowners, like other men, were actuated by self-interest in devising safeguards for the protection of their property from injury, and these safeguards, formulated in many cases by persons having more legal than agricultural knowledge, were often needlessly, and in some instances grotesquely, irksome. But the point is that, while they frequently hampered an improving farmer and hindered progressive farming, they also served to preserve the land from being pilfered of its fertility. The old restrictive covenants have gone, and the principle of freedom of cultivation has been adopted by Act of Parliament. But whether its ownership remains in private hands, is vested in the State or in local authorities, or is transferred to the occupiers, the land must be fairly dealt by, and the maintenance of its fertility should, in the national interest, be the paramount consideration. Warnings are not lacking from new countries that the self-interest of the occupier is not always a sufficient protection for the land. Under whatever conditions the land may be farmed, no system can, from the national point of view, be satisfactory which allows the economic exigencies of the present generation to endanger the nation's wealth.

It is not a simple problem to reconcile free scope for the enterprise of the occupier with protection for the land, but its solution is facilitated in this

country by the fact that the land, as a great abstraction above all temporary interests, is loved, and one might almost say worshipped, by those who live by it. The service of the land seems to engender a personal devotion, especially among those whose roots in the soil go far into the centuries. Among the agricultural labourers this passion for the land is often most marked. In a recent book¹ containing interviews with a number of agricultural labourers it is remarked :—

“ Again and again one is struck by the intimate feeling of the labourer towards the soil.

“ ‘ They ought to look after the land. Ain’t she the mother of us all ? ’ said one man.”

And from the farmer’s point of view an old friend of mine, who has occupied the same farm for over half a century, voices the same affection :—

“ Born and bred on the land, the land has always called me. I hear the call now, although it reaches me too often within walls and not in the open field.

“ Love of the land makes me ask the readers of this little book² to stick to the land, because Mother Earth is kind to all her children, whose zeal is according to knowledge.”

Where the land is cultivated by men inspired by this devotion it is in no danger of unfair treatment.

¹ “ How the Labourer Lives,” by B. Seebohm Rowntree and May Kendall, 1913.

² “ Story of a Staffordshire Farm,” by T. Carrington Smith, 1913.

The present generation owes much to its forbears who have made the land. This little island in the mists of the northern sea cannot as a whole be described as a naturally fertile country, though its soil for the most part responds generously to generous treatment. The present fertility of large parts of it is the result of the lavish outlay of labour and capital. Millions of money, generations of men, have gone to the making of English land. It is a goodly heritage: let us cherish it!

Even on the surface of agricultural affairs, where, as observed above, movement and disturbance are apparent, a reference to the subjects dealt with in these papers justifies the saying that the more things change the more they remain the same. In summarising the history of British agriculture during the half century which had elapsed since the repeal of the Corn Laws (Chapter II.), an allusion to the public discussion of protective duties in 1897 was made: in 1913 the discussion is unfinished. The "rural exodus" (Chapter IV.) aroused great interest twenty years ago: the consideration of its causes and effects is equally insistent now. The conditions under which agricultural produce can best be brought to the consumer—the need for effective market facilities (Chapter III.)—are still of vital import. Even in the comparatively minor matter of the method of selling live stock (Chapter IX.), the inertia of the agricultural mind is exemplified.