

## BACK TO THE LAND

By Barrowsgate.

That a country rises or falls by its agriculture is abundantly clear from a review of the farming industry in the past, history going to show that the man on the land is a most vital factor in the welfare of a nation. It also goes to prove that no country, however rich in other things can ever hope for any great degree of success or sustained prosperity and retain its economic balance for long if agriculture is allowed to fall into a state of decay. Any practicable scheme then that can be evolved to improve farming conditions and put agriculture generally on a sound and healthy basis again will be warmly welcomed and should be the first duty of the government and all who study the welfare of the country.

The great war with its resultant aftermath of economic troubles has been held responsible for the present state of affairs and no doubt it has been the main contributory cause of the present depression, but the war was not wholly the reason for the present diseased state of agriculture. The seat of the trouble is to be found in a movement initiated by the landed proprietors themselves in a period long before the war, a movement sanctioned and fostered by successive governments blind to the palpable evils of the step.

The movement to which I refer was the abolition of the crofting system of agriculture and the merging of the small farms into one large holding - a policy that has done more to injure the well-being of farming than most people imagine or is apparent at first glance, but a slight study of the facts will prove the truth of the statement.

In many - alas, too many - of our Scottish glens the cultivated land has returned to its former wild and virgin state and the tenants - industrious, contented crofters - have had to move in order that the ground might be again turned into deer forests or grouse moors, and as such provide sport for some alien Croesus. But does the actual gain to the proprietor balance the loss sustained by the country through losing a vital and integral part of the mechanism which has made its agriculture such an efficient machine? Emphatically no, the loss in man power, loss in production, increase of unemployment and above all the loss of that sturdy spirit of independence which characterised our crofter people can never be balanced by monetary gain to the individual.

So, too, has the tacking on of the smaller farms to the larger contributed in no small measure to the failure of agriculture as a means of using our surplus labour, in fact these farm mergers have increased unemployment to a far greater extent than is generally known.

For example: if two farms employing (say) three men each are joined to one employing six and the three places are then farmed as one holding, one would naturally conclude that twelve men would still find work, but that is not the case. For you will find that the staff has now decreased by at least four and sometimes six men, and either their places have been filled with boys or the adoption of mechanical labour saving devices has made them unnecessary. Tractor power can be profitably used on these large farms, whereas there is not enough scope for it on the smaller holdings, therefore it can be easily seen how those farm mergers help to swell the ranks of the unemployed. More than that, the work deteriorates from the adoption of so much unskilled labour, and so in time the fertility of the land is endangered and consequently/

consequently returns less. Again the occupier of the combined holding finds that the outlying portions of his farm cannot be economically worked as they are too far from the centre of operations, the longer haulage with its consequent loss of time adding very considerably to the farmer's overhead expenses.

So we find that those outlying fields are allowed to lapse or are laid down as permanent pasture and so again production is lessened and unemployment increased.

Horse-breeding, for which our country is so justly famous, has suffered in the same way, through the extinction of the small holdings, for as these could only be profitably worked with horse power the breeding of these was an essential part of the farmers' business.

Again the large farms can use far larger implements, thus using less manual labour, and so the demand for the many smaller implements necessary to the small-holder, has greatly declined, and here again the manufacturer suffers, while the local blacksmith now ekes out a precarious existence by catering for chance motorists.

Another thing that has had a great influence on agriculture from the productive point of view is the present system of short term leases. In former years when nearly all leases were for a long period the tenant had to keep his land in good heart by careful cultivation and systematic and scientific manuring in order to keep up the standard of production over the long term of his occupancy, otherwise disaster would overtake him long before the expiry of his lease.

But now-a-days far too many of our farms are being ruined by unscrupulous farmers, who suck the very life blood from them in the few years for which they have them leased, and then flit to pastures new, leaving an impoverished farm behind them, which even with careful farming/

farming will take long years ere it recovers its former fertility.

Absentee landlords who relegate the whole administrative work of their estates to non-resident factors also do an immense amount of harm to themselves, their tenants and indirectly the general public.

A sympathetic understanding between laird and tenant, and a resident factor alive to the needs of the farmer and with a sound practical knowledge of agriculture in all its branches, is essential if farming is to be successful and profitable to both owner and occupier.

It is an undisputed fact that most farmers have a decided antipathy to dealing with the solicitor-factor who transacts all his business in an office in town, and who has usually little or nothing in common with the man on the land and whose opinion of farmers generally is very often that they are unmitigated nuisances: "Ay' cryin' oot an' aye seekin' ".

On the other hand the farmer finds that the non-resident factor is in many instances an adept at promising, but a novice at performing.

The question now arises - How is farming going to be put back on a sound economic basis and what steps must be taken to ensure a healthy condition of agriculture with a progressive and prosperous future before it, a state which would bring about a natural increase of profitable production and a resultant decrease of unemployment. To achieve this desired end drastic reforms in many directions are needed and the co-operation of landlord, tenant and the government is necessary for any scheme to be successful.

Legislation should be introduced making it obligatory on owner and occupier to conform to a sound and practical system of leasing and cultivating the land.

Longer leases, say nineteen years, should be made compulsory and the tenants made to give an undertaking that they will farm the land in accordance with the accepted rules of good husbandry. Landlords should be compelled to return a proportion of their revenue to the land in the form of improvements such as drainage, sanitation, the repair or renewal of buildings and as a sinking fund for compensation in cases of damage by vermin to growing crops, while farm mergers should be prohibited. The government should make a complete revision of the game laws and provide the farmer with adequate protection against the ravages of fur and feather by making it illegal for any proprietor or shooting tenant to overstock the estate with game, or in other words by making the farmer pay for the lairds pleasure.

A return to the small farming system should be encouraged and approved applicants subsidised, reasonable rents fixed, resident factors appointed who would hold the balance fairly as between laird and tenant and if advisable a government inspectorship established to see that the conditions laid down were being faithfully observed by all parties concerned. A scheme of co-operative marketing should be evolved whereby the farmer could reap the advantage of the true value of his produce by eliminating the middleman - parasites who batten on the farmer by ruling the price of stock and who are in effect the dominant factors governing the marketing policy of most of our auction marts. To revert to the small holding system, it would be most unwise to place people on the land who have no actual experience of farming, for no one, however well endowed otherwise, can ever hope to be successful on the land without the practical knowledge that is only gained by a lifetime's association with the soil/

soil, a lifetime of battling against the seasons and the ever changing conditions of agriculture.

Rather than let the government settle on the land, the lands own unemployed, for they are the men who by every law of birth and training may be expected to make the best use of the opportunities granted them and who would render a faithful account of their stewardship. A "back to the land" movement on these lines would benefit not only agriculture but all the other industries contingent on farming, for the return to smaller holdings would arrest the drift of the rural population to the towns, unemployment would decrease, production would increase, our dependence on the foreigner would be materially lessened and once more our straths and glens would be peopled with those virile sons of the soil who have through the ages made our country famous.

By all means let us, back to the land, prosperity lies in having the land at our back.