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English Farming, Past and Present

The author and politician Rowland Edmund Prothero (1851–1937), an expert on British agricultural history, held the post of President of the Board of Agriculture in David Lloyd George's cabinet between 1916 and 1919. In 1885 he had written an article for the Quarterly Review in which he traced the progress of English agriculture since the middle ages. This was expanded into a book, published in 1888 as The Pioneers and Progress of English Farming. Then, in 1912, Prothero revised and greatly expanded it under its current title, bringing the story up to date. This classic work charts the development of farming from the medieval manorial system up to the Corn Laws in the nineteenth century and the agricultural crises that confronted administrators at the beginning of the twentieth. The appendices include a chronological list of agricultural writers as well as data on the Corn Laws, tithes, acreage and wages.
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ENGLISH FARMING
PAST AND PRESENT
ENGLISH FARMING

PAST AND PRESENT

BY

ROWLAND E. PROTHERO

LATE FELLOW OF ALL SOULS COLLEGE, OXFORD

"Writing and ploughing are two different talents; and he that writes well must have spent in his study that time which is necessary to be spent in the fields by him who will be master of the art of cultivating them."

JETHRO TULL.

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PREFACE

_English Farming Past and Present_ is based on an article which appeared in the _Quarterly Review_ for 1885. The article was subsequently expanded into a book, published in 1888 by Messrs. Longman under the title of _The Pioneers and Progress of English Farming_.

The book has been out of print for twenty years. Written with the confidence of comparative youth and inexperience, it expressed as certainties many opinions which might now be modified, if not withdrawn. But its motives were two convictions, which time has rather strengthened than weakened. One was, that the small number of persons who owned agricultural land might some day make England the forcing-bed of schemes for land-nationalisation, which countries, where the ownership of the soil rested on a more democratic basis, repudiated as destructive of all forms of private property. The other was, that a considerable increase in the number of peasant ownerships, in suitable hands, on suitable land, and in suitable localities, was socially, economically, and agriculturally advantageous.

Since 1888, the whole field of economic history has been so carefully and skilfully cultivated, that another work on a branch of the subject might appear superfluous. But there still seemed to be room for a consecutive history of English agriculture, written from a practical point of view, and tracing the influence of the progress of the industry on the social conditions of those engaged in its pursuit. Great economic changes have resulted from small alterations in the details of manufacturing processes. Similar changes may often be explained by some little-noticed alterations in farming practice. The introduction of the field-cultivation of turnips, for example, was as truly the parent of a social revolution as the introduction of textile machinery. The main object of _The Pioneers and Progress of English Farming_, and, in greater
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PREFACE

detail, of English Farming Past and Present, is to suggest that advances in agricultural skill, the adoption of new methods, the application of new resources, the invention of new implements, have been, under the pressure of national necessities, powerful instruments in breaking up older forms of rural society, and in moulding them into their present shape.

Students of economic and social questions—and at the present day most people are interested in these subjects—will decide whether the influence of these simple and natural causes has been greater or less than is suggested. Even those who consider that their importance is exaggerated, may find in the record of their progress a useful commentary on the political explanations which they themselves prefer to adopt. The book may still serve another purpose. It touches rural life at many different points and at many different stages. Dwellers in the country are surrounded by traces of older conditions of society. They may perhaps find, through English Farming Past and Present, a new interest in piecing together the fragments of an agricultural past, and in reconstructing, as in one of the fashionable occupations of the day, a picture of the Middle Ages or of the eighteenth century in the midst of their own familiar surroundings.

Now that the book is in print and on the eve of publication, I feel more acutely than ever the disadvantages under which it has been prepared. English Farming Past and Present is the by-product of a life occupied in other pursuits than those of literature. It has been impossible to work upon it for any continuous period of time. Written in odd half-hours, it has been often laid aside for weeks and even months. My thanks are therefore due, in more abundant measure, to Professor Ashley, Sir Ernest Clarke, and Mr. H. Trustram Eve, who have kindly read the proof-sheets and helped me with corrections, and above all to Mr. G. H. Holden, who has also verified the references and prepared the Index.

ROWLAND E. PROTHERO.

September 6, 1912.
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