THE TENURE OF AGRICULTURAL LAND
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BY

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AND

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Our heavenly Father hath not judged it right
To leave the road of agriculture light;
'Twas he who first made husbandry a plan,
And care a wheatsome for the wit of man;
Nor suffers he his own domains to lie
Asleep in cumbrous old-world lethargy.

George, 1. 140–145
tr. R. D. BLACKMORE

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PREFACE
TO SECOND EDITION

The speedy exhaustion of the first issue of this little study of the present position of land tenure and the outlook for it, is evidence of widespread interest in the problem of the development of the country-side. Advocacy of the expropriation of the landlord and State ownership of the land is difficult, in view of the prejudice which associated ideas have created, and it is gratifying to be able to record that both reviewers and correspondents (with only a single exception) have recognised that the proposals contained in the following pages represent a bona fide effort, free from all political intent, to find a means of arresting the decay of the agricultural industry of this country. A Times reviewer has reminded us that so long ago as 1912 Lord Ernle pointed out that to say that landlords were too impoverished to make the required expenditure for the equipment, maintenance and improvement of their farms was equivalent to saying that “the modern system of farming had broken down in one of its most essential features.” The break-up of the old estates, following

1 The Times, 1st September, 1925.
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the war, has proved the truth of this conclusion, and
that the new conditions which farmers have perforce
evolved are unlikely to bring about any amelioration of
the position has recently been foretold by Lord Ernle's
present successor at the Ministry of Agriculture.

With the diagnosis of the case made with such
authority we respectfully and most fully agree. In the
following pages we indicate the treatment which we
would recommend, and it remains for those who do not
like it to suggest a better one. A few corrections and
additions have been made, and a paragraph is included
by way of comment on certain aspects of the proposals
of the Liberal Land Committee, whose report has just
been published; otherwise we have found no reason for
departing from anything contained in the first issue.

C. S. O.
W. R. P.

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PREFACE

TO FIRST EDITION

The Rt Hon. Edward Wood, M.P., spoke on 9 December, 1924, as follows:

“As I conceive it, at the present time, taking a view of British agriculture that is not confined to this year, or to next year, there is something like a silent revolution in progress within its borders. We are, unless I mistake, witnessing in England the gradual disappearance of the old landowning class. Within the last five years the number of occupying owners has almost exactly doubled, and at the present time those occupying owners hold something like 25 per cent. of the total area under crops and grass. For my part, I am very glad to see the principle of ownership extended, because I think that it is the sheet anchor of the country. But we ought not to shut our eyes to the fact that, as that process goes on, it is raising a problem that is likely to become increasingly acute, and that is the problem of finding the maintenance capital of the land as apart from the current working capital. Any of us who are accustomed to live in the country, who watch this process going on, see to-day a deterioration in what I may call the capital equipment of the land and the soil, whether in building or in drainage. I could go on indefinitely through the category in which we see that process at work....The real truth of the matter is that the old landowner did supply the essential capital equipment of the land at a most astonishingly cheap rate of interest. If that class, by taxation or for one reason
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or another, is gradually disappearing, what is going to happen?... The new owners who survive will find their position increasingly difficult—and many a new occupying owner who has, in many cases, sunk too much of his capital on that side of the business, has left himself inadequate capital with which to run his ordinary working business. That means either that the soil is going to be starved and is gradually going to lose some of its fecundity by the land becoming waterlogged and so on; or the nation is going to say: 'We cannot watch this process going on,' and the State will come in to fill the function of the old landlord by lending capital. When it does that you may depend upon it that it will claim some measure of control in the business that it finances, and so you may well find yourselves in the course of the next thirty or forty years within measurable distance of something like nationalisation by a side wind."

The proposals for the reconstruction of land tenure contained in the following pages relate only to rural England. In effect they may be found to contain little of novelty; even before the days of Mill and of Henry George there were individuals and groups of persons who have advocated the abolition of private property in land. Most of them have been identified closely with the more revolutionary elements of the most advanced political party, and inevitably their proposals have been launched on a sea of prejudice which has prevented them from reaching a haven of calm consideration; some, indeed, have never merited any such consideration of their views by reason of their frankly confiscatory nature, which is never likely to make any appeal to the public conscience. Since the
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breakdown of Mr Lloyd George’s Land Valuation less has been heard of the need for land reform upon such lines, but the recent election has shown that there are still those who think that a prosperous countryside can arise only from the ashes of the landlord’s home and from “the destruction of the last vestiges of feudalism” whatever this phrase may mean.

The authors have no political ends to serve; they know that under the system of tenure which these reformers are so ready to condemn England has attained to a standard of efficiency in farming which has been an example to the world; they have seen so much of the advantages to many a rural community of the leadership of a benevolent despot as to enable them to assess at its true value much of the criticism that is levelled against him. But the old order, with all its merits, is giving place to new. The transfer of land was immensely stimulated by the Finance Act (1909–10), 1910, and continued to gain impetus until the slump in values consequent on the deflation policy following the conclusion of Peace. There are again signs of increasing activity in the land-market; once more the land-speculator is raising his ugly head, and with the probability of some five years of stable government under an administration not avowedly hostile to the landlord, coupled with the uncertainty of the position thereafter, it seems reasonable to suppose that the break-up of the old estates will proceed at a greater and a greater rate.

In these circumstances it behoves everyone who has
the interests of rural life and labour at heart to think whether there is no alternative to the policy of drift, and to give unbiased consideration to any serious counter proposals. Amongst these the question of State ownership of land (which has nothing whatever to do with State control of agriculture) comes foremost to the mind, and in the following pages the attempt is made to give it dispassionate consideration as a great economic problem having no necessary connection with the aims and objects of any one of the political parties of the State.

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