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Richard Heath

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The English Peasant

Richard Heath, about whom very little is known, travelled around England towards the end of the nineteenth century, and wrote a series of essays on agricultural workers when rural life and agriculture were undergoing great changes. *The English Peasant* was published in book form in 1893. It begins with an outline history of peasant life, which presents a very depressing picture. Agricultural workers' housing may have been picturesque but was primitive in the extreme, and enclosure of common land had worsened their lot, especially in the south and west of England. Heath gives graphic pictures of the conditions in which peasant families lived and worked, dwelling especially on the high figures for infant mortality. He was understandably shocked that a Christian country could let its workers live in such conditions, but hoped that the foundation of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in 1872 would result in improvements.

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108025287

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1893

This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-02528-7 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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THE
ENGLISH PEASANT

*STUDIES: HISTORICAL, LOCAL, AND
BIOGRAPHIC*

BY

RICHARD HEATH

London

T. FISHER UNWIN

PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1893

Cambridge University Press

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P R E F A C E.

THE various papers of which this book is composed were written for different periodicals, at different periods between 1870 and 1884, without thought of their being brought together and forming a whole.

My interest in the subject began with a study of the Reports of the Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture (1867), which I took up in order to gain information for some illustrated articles I was planning on the various types of cottages in the different English counties.

These Reports soon convinced me that the subject was too serious to be treated in the pretty fashion I intended, and the result was the paper here reprinted and entitled "*The Cottage Homes of England*."

The interest thus awakened led me, between 1870 and 1874, to make a number of pedestrian tours in various parts of the country, and to give the information gathered, and the sketches made, in a series of papers. While I was thus going about and talking to various types of English peasants, the Warwickshire strike

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occurred, making it clear that a new era had begun for the Agricultural Labourer ; and this fact may lend an interest to these “ *Walks and Talks* ” beyond their intrinsic merit.

After this came the sketches of typical English Peasants here reproduced. William Cobbett, John Clare, and William Huntington are types of the tangled, distorted lives lived by men of genius who come from the lower ranks of English rural life. It is not so much in what these men did, as in what they were unable to do ; not so much in the degree of fame to which they individually attained, as in the warping of their lives, in the positive sacrifice of their souls, that the interest lies. In this trilogy each life is a tragedy, and each tragedy is more tragic than the one it follows ; and the lives of these men represent those of thousands that have been lived in England. On whom must the blame fall, but on those who have hitherto monopolised power and authority in the rural districts, as well as all the means of higher education ?

The articles latest in point of date are those placed at the opening and conclusion of this book. As expressions of the growth of convictions resulting from practical experiences, supplemented by a careful looking up of authorities, those articles are, I venture to think, the more important of the series. With regard to the “ *English Via Dolorosa : or, Glimpses of the History of the Agricultural Labourer,* ” if any one cares to look at the former Edition, they will find a long list of the sources consulted. Chief among them I must mention Sir Frederick Eden’s “ *History of the State of the Poor.* ” This precious work, now relegated in the Library of the British Museum to an obscure place on the

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floor, will ere long be fully acknowledged to possess a living historical importance, transcending most of the well-bound Chronicles and Histories which to-day are in the place of honour.

In the last paper of all, "*The Poor Man's Gospel*," I have pursued the subject in the historical vein characteristic of the whole series, and have striven to show what has ever been the faith of the poor and suffering since the new Revelation men had of God and Duty in Jesus Christ.

The thought with which it concludes, though taken from one of the very earliest of the representatives of the English Agricultural Labourer, exactly harmonises with the one great thought of the "Via Dolorosa," and thus suggests that that thought is a very old one; that it is, in fact, the very soul of the Christian Religion: God revealed to us throughout the ages, suffering in human form.

I thank the Editors of the "Contemporary Review," the "Leisure Hour," and "Golden Hours" for courteously agreeing to the reprint of the articles which appeared in those periodicals. I ought, perhaps, to add, that in some cases these articles have been abbreviated, and that all have been revised. To Dr Whittemore I owe further acknowledgment, since it was under his encouragement that I began the "Walks and Talks" which, more than anything else perhaps, led me into the heart of my subject.

And now, at the very moment that I conclude the work of

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bringing together these various articles in one book by writing this Preface, a great and well-conceived measure, instituting a complete system of democratic government throughout rural England, is being introduced into Parliament. Parish and District Councils form another step towards the realisation of that England which has been the ideal of thinkers and seers. A day, as joyous as those in the past have been sorrowful, seems about to open for "the Agricultural Labourer, oppressed and depressed for a thousand years."

RICHARD HEATH.

March 21st 1893.