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### The Land and its People

Rowland Prothero, Baron Ernle (1851–1937) was an author, land agent and politician, whose public career was particularly concerned with agricultural matters. During the First World War he served as President of the Board of Agriculture, organising a significant increase in agricultural production by bringing more land into cultivation and mobilising the labour of the Women's Land Army and prisoners of war. As food shipping from overseas was increasingly interrupted by enemy submarines, this was vital to the national food supply, and many of his reforms were reinstated in 1939–45. *The Land and its People* was published in 1925, and examines the rural economy at a time of great change. He outlines the social and economic history of agriculture in the nineteenth century, before discussing the recent wartime policies, and how state control of agriculture and the application of scientific methods were changing British farming.

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# The Land and its People

*Chapters in Rural Life and History*

ROWLAND EDMUND PROTHERO



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108025300](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108025300)

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1925  
This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-02530-0 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 LAND AND ITS PEOPLE;  
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*The Land and its People ;  
Chapters in Rural Life and History.  
By the Right Honble. Lord Ernle, M.V.O.  
Formerly Fellow of All Souls College and Honorary  
Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford ; late President  
of the Board of Agriculture, 1916-19    ::    ::*

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LONDON : HUTCHINSON & CO.,  
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## P R E F A C E

THE following pages bear, more or less directly, on questions of the moment which are daily assuming graver importance.

The first five chapters deal with a striking change in our social and economic history. It is the transformation of rural districts in the course of the transition from collective to individual farming, the altered position of cultivators of the soil, and the consequent torpor which has fallen on the life of country villages. The interest of the subject is not merely antiquarian : it is living and actual. Nearly every stage in the history is the subject of political, social or economic controversy, though, as it seems to me, the underlying agricultural causes, which influenced and sometimes controlled the movement, have been neglected both by its assailants and its defenders. On the break-up of village farms, one group of politicians found an attack on private property in land. On their revival on modern lines, another group base their hopes of the prosperity of a reorganized agriculture. In the study of their working may lie the partial solution of the problem of labour on the land. For centuries, the English peasantry not only cultivated but occupied the soil. The wage-earning workers of to-day have not forgotten the ideals and traditions of their ancestors, which the unchanging conditions of their industry preserve freshly in their memories. Finally, it may be hoped that a brief sketch of the medieval system may help some dwellers in the country to realize with greater vividness new meanings and interests in their familiar surroundings.



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Chapters VI. and VII. deal with the war period of State Control. The Food Campaign of 1916-18 is already ancient history. But it has left its mark on political thought of the present as well as of the future. For a little more than two years, the Government assumed direction of the industry, and created an elaborate organization to make its control and assistance as effective as possible. The partial success which was attained in stimulating production, combined as it was with a period of high wages and standardized prices, has undoubtedly fostered the growth of State Socialism. It is also noticeable that, in the programme of their Land Policy, the Independent Labour Party has accepted in detail the organization created by the Government in 1916-18. A policy adopted to meet war emergencies is not necessarily a safe precedent for peace conditions. For these and other reasons, a record of the Food Campaign, written by the responsible Minister, may be useful.

Chapter VIII. discusses some of the popular charges often made against agricultural landowners, and often based on misunderstanding of facts.

Chapter IX., written in November 1922, lays stress on the difficulty of framing an agricultural policy which will reconcile the divergent interests of farmers in their business with those of taxpayers and consumers. Modern agriculture has been reconstructed on the principle of giving free play to individual enterprise. State assistance in the form of bounties or subsidies could only be given, under our present fiscal system, on terms which would restrict the independence and freedom of farmers. It is wise to explore every possible form of more indirect help which can be given by Governments. But it seemed, and still seems, to me that, until, under the pressure of unemployment, urban wage-earners demand the safeguarding of home industries, farmers must, in the main, meet their

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difficulties out of their own resources and by the application of business methods.

Chapter X. is the prophecy of an optimist. No dates are given for the fulfilment of the forecast. It may, therefore, be difficult to disprove the prediction that the future of British farming, except in certain favoured districts, lies in the increased production of bread, meat and milk from land under the plough.

Most of the chapters have been largely rewritten. But their substance has already appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Journals* of the Ministry of Agriculture and of the Royal Agricultural Society, or James Hunter's *Seed Catalogue* for 1923. My thanks are due to the Editors for their permission to reprint such portions as have already appeared.

In conclusion, I desire to thank Mr. Arthur Harrison for the help without which I could not have prepared these pages for the Press.

ERNLE.

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