

THE FAILURE OF 'BACK TO THE LAND'

HOWEVER enthusiastic we may be concerning what is called 'the back to the land movement,' it is a fact that most of the attempts made in any organised form, in recent years have ended in failure. However much we may deplore that fact, it still remains a fact, and 'trying again' in the same way with the same mistakes, except in regard to some details, is not likely to do more than to convince our unconverted brethren that 'it can't be done'. We should surely learn from our past failures some other way of achieving the high task which is literally our only 'alternative to death'.

The failure of most, if not all, of the well-intentioned 'movements' of past years has been due to one or all of three causes: lack of funds, lack of suitable people and lack of education. The last is fundamental and overwhelmingly the real cause of failure. You cannot make a farmer out of a townsman until he becomes, by training and experience, not a townsman settled on the land but a true countryman in every sense of the word. He has to learn more than the technical aspects of his new work. He must before, and above all, begin a new way of living. He must, by patient endeavour and humble obedience, re-orientate his thoughts to a new valuing of almost the whole of his life.

The problem is immense, the suggested solutions innumerable, but we shall not in the future any more than in the past find the true solution without facing the real issue, and the issue is mainly one of education and the re-setting of values. A host of willing helpers, complete with public or secondary school education, may be, and usually are, a great joy to a farmer who has left all things to follow the Divine Wisdom of Nazareth. Their companionship, their conversation, their interests, bring back to him some at least of the good things in the world he has left. But willingness is not effectiveness, nor is the appreciation of the value of work the only requisite for its well-doing. Father McNabb once epitomised life in the words 'work and the preparation for work.' The tragedy of 'back to the land movements' is not a lack of men willing to work. It is the tragic lack of sufficient men willing or able to prepare themselves, in the hardness of humble obedience, for the high calling which, in the midst of a materialistic, over-industrialised, society is so often a true leaving of all things to find the pearl of great price which is the fullness of Christian living.

The urgency of our task—the rebuilding of rural England—may not be gainsaid. But urgency is not always consonant with haste, and it may well be that we, in this generation, can do no more than the

foundation work—the re-setting of men's minds to the right valuing of the things of the earth.

The problem is above all a problem of human minds. The task the re-education of our brethren. The issue almost entirely the question of education. The question, that is to say, not how can we get more men and families away from the towns into the country, but how can we make countrymen?

There are schemes, some good, some bad, for the training of ex-service men for work on the land. There is the Women's Land Army, which, for our purpose, differs in its effectiveness from place to place. There are Agricultural Colleges, Chairs at Universities and so on. The emphasis in all these schemes is, for the most part, on *work* on the land rather than on *life* there. Even the best of them do but touch the outer fringe of the great problem. 'The wisdom of the fields' cannot be taught in a short course in a land settlement by professors, however distinguished. These things may and do help enormously to begin, or more exactly to prepare men's minds to want to begin. But the real knowledge and the real wisdom is taught by nature herself in all the varying moods of her temperament, in earth and wind and rain and beast.

Our beginnings, then, must be in the minds of men. Our first task is the re-valuing of the land and of human workmanship in the minds of the present *educators*, and above all in the minds of Christian parents. We have to teach, not only the need and worth of productive, responsible work, but also the vocational aspect of productive responsibility. We need, far more than men in the fields, men and women in towns who will send their children to learn the earth's high wisdom as willingly, and with as much self-sacrifice, as other parents send their children to the higher but not truer vocation of religious life.

Secondly, we need Catholic farmers, of whom there is a greater number than is generally realised, willing to receive into their homes and on their farms boys and girls of fourteen or fifteen years of age as pupils, to be taught in the atmosphere of a Christian home all the varying fullness of life on the land. It is possible to take a boy of 15 and break his heart and spirit in a few months of lonely drudgery in the many uninteresting unskilled tasks of farm life. It is also possible to give him such a variety of obviously useful and skill-demanding tasks, intermingled with the other kind, that he acquires that natural loving of earth and beast which is half the battle in the making of a countryman. It takes much patience, it means much sacrifice in time and often in money from the farmer, but it is the only way. A scheme could surely be devised in which parents and farmers in different parts of the country could co-operate in this work of education for the land. Boys and girls could go from one type of farm to another, spending a

year here and a year there, six months on that farm, another period on this, and so gradually acquiring the real lessons of country life. One or two boys on each farm—two is the ideal: a co-relation of effort—and help if necessary from a central fund, would not only make farmers more efficiently and more quickly (for those in a hurry), but would do much to re-establish a common bond between the often too-scattered families which make Catholic rural England. If we have to have a 'movement,' let it be one of arranging these things through some kind of central information bureau. The work itself is better done in the homely atmosphere of a family farm. There is no reason why some such scheme of agricultural apprenticeship need be confined to farm work as such. It could embrace the whole great variety of crafts on which efficient farming depends. There is no reason, either, for those who feel that way about it, why such a scheme could not be made part of the national scheme of education.

There is a part in such a scheme for all. There is a great need for priests willing and able to help. The wandering friar was a familiar sight in Catholic England. The need today is for an itinerant pastoral clergy—which is not to say that the work could not be done by a religious order. But already we need priests to go among our farmers, to live with them overnight, to say Mass in their homes before the day's work begins, to move among their people, sharing their interests and being content for their sustenance on the daily hospitality of the men they would find as their only-too-willing hosts. One priest with a central church for Sunday Mass could cover a great sphere of activity and a large tract of country if his daily Mass could be said in small chapels or even on portable altars in the homes of his scattered flock. Priests have done such things in the army. Why should the faculty for them be a matter of any great difficulty in this truer and more urgent 'battle of Britain'? Decisions in these matters must necessarily rest with our Fathers in God, and we may content ourselves in leaving them to those to whom they belong—although suggestions may be made in respectful obedience to most superiors!

The field of education in the academic sense could be served by Brothers and nuns in the same way, but the difficulties there would be greater and the details harder to arrange.

Much work has to be done, many difficulties and much opposition overcome, before such a scheme could come into being with any effectiveness as far as the great number of our people are concerned. But the scheme itself may be begun tomorrow—or at least as soon as two Catholic parents find one Catholic farmer willing to take their son into his home to begin that older and fuller life without which England cannot live.

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