ENGLAND AND THE COUNTRYMAN

IT is now some time since Mr. Massingham began to educate and delight us with his studies of the English rural tradition, but the present book[1] may be considered his most mature achievement. In it he takes the types which he regards as most representative of the English countryman and examines in turn the origins, status, character and history of each. The history indeed is of rather a melancholy kind, since in each case rise and development is followed by a decline and fall, the fortunes of the countryside being bound up with those of England and its culture at large, and the movement towards modern times being a retreat rather than an advance. The replacement of sacred by secular, of spiritual by material, of the functional and the reasonable by the functionless and irrational, of many-sided wisdom by the smartness of business men and the research of undisciplined scientists—these are the characteristic notes of modernity, and it is natural that they should appear with particular vividness in the history of so central and primary a thing as agriculture. Nevertheless, the diagnosis is not a hopeless one, and its partial acceptance now, with the chance of wider acceptance soon, offers some possibility of a return to the norm we have forsaken.

Since a peasantry has been in some sense the ground of every great civilisation, a general idea of the present posture of things may be drawn from the opening sentence, undeniably true: 'The most important fact about the English peasantry is that it no longer exists.' It is to history therefore that we must look for the English peasant, and Mr. Massingham portrays him to us as a member of a self-governing and co-operative village community, not indeed strictly owning his land (for 'when his society flourished, every secular acre was king's land and every sacred one God's'), but owning the tillage of the land and with 'more security of tenure than the most secure of modern landowners.' Even in the days of 'serfdom' his status and function were essentially different from those of the slave-labourers of the Roman *Latifundia* (whether in Italy or in the provinces), and the development of customary rights over against manorial overlordship assured him a kind of personal liberty inconceivable to the modern proletariat. His way of life, his speech and his games are brought vividly before us, and the religious foundations of his culture are duly appreciated. 'The integral

[1] H. J. Massingham, 'The English Countryman' (Batsford: 16s.).

relation between the peasant and his religion is pictorially presented by the siting of every parish church in every village. The fields, the cottages and farms and the church—God, Man, Earth—these ultimates of life are represented by the subordination of the fields to the houses and of the houses to the church.' Such is the tradition which after varying fortunes was dissolved by the General Enclosure Act of 1845.

The yeoman, the aristocrat of the peasant community, is historically distinguished from the peasant not only by wider ownership of land but as a freeholder whose personal independence was a right to be held to, not a privilege to be won. 'He is the bridge between the peasant and the knightly class, and after the break-up of the manor, from which both the wage-labourers and the yeomanry increased their numbers, he virtually became the connecting link between the rich and the poor. He possessed the security of the former without their wealth and inherited the traditions of the latter without their lacks. He was only poor among the rich and rich among the poor. He was in fact the rural middle class, and that binding position accounts for the structural stability he conferred upon rural society.' In most periods of English history he is a characteristic and well-loved figure, but Mr. Massingham does well to dwell particularly on his standing and character in the seventeenth century. Henry Best and John Evelyn are quoted in some detail on the admirable farming methods of this age, and the smallholder of to-day may read with wistfulness and respect of Evelyn's compost heap with its fifty-odd ingredients; it is like a schoolboy's dream of the Christmas cakes that used to be.

The chapter on the craftsman may be for some readers the most illuminating in the whole book. At a time when Art and arts have been so sharply sundered and when physical and mental remoteness from normal small communities has induced a general ignorance of what is implied by craftsmanship, it is most valuable to be given such detail of the wealth and variety of crafts and of the craftsman's attitude to his work Among points well made are the craftsman's 'symbiotic' relation with nature, the inheritance of crafts within families, the subordination of profit to the good of the work done,[2] the relations of work and leisure ('My pleasures and hobbies throughout my life have been my work,' said a Winchcombe carpenter to the author), and the give and take between craftsmanship and husbandry. 'From time immemorial, the prac-

[2] I have just been reading in Dr. Coomaraswamy how 'even to-day the Indian shopkeeper is apt to ask: Do you think I am in business only for profit?'

tice of a craft was the part-time or seasonal occupation of the husbandman, while the craftsman almost invariably had a "close" or holding of his own, the hurdler an acre or less of coppice, the basket-maker an osier-bed, the straw-plaiter a plot of corn, the potter a stake in the clay-pit, the mason or waller a share in the quarry. Or the wife of the land-worker practised gloving or lace-making in the intervals of nursing the baby or getting her husband's dinner. The daughter of a shepherd I know had her bobbins made by her father home from the fold. Nowhere could the peasant art and domestic industry be unpicked from the peasant's tillage—the whole was a seamless garment. The home, the family and the country—craft embraced all three in one.' It might have been interesting also to observe in some detail how in various arts a good tradition survived in the country long after it had been depraved in the town (e.g. lettering on tomb-stones in village churchyards kept great dignity at a time when the urban 'monumental mason' had quite forgotten the nature of the alphabet).

The farm labourer, now commonly regarded in England as a counterpart of the European peasant, is in fact as different a being as human means could make him. He 'is indeed a lineal descendant from the peasant community, but a landless proletariat working on the land is an anomaly having no organic relation with a people rooted in it and the rich humus of its own traditions. The land was anciently regarded as the measure of all human rights, and to turn its uses from permanent livelihood to incidental employment is to cut the heart out of the peasant economy. The wage-earning labourer is essentially an urban idea.' But though dispossessed by the enclosures, reduced to pauperdom, and long treated with a brutality which it is still shocking to see recalled,[3] the new class retained from its ancestors enough courage and character, enough traditional wisdom and working responsibility to enrich the society that despised it. The labourer is still with us, still 'locked to the land without having any share in it'; and, as Mr. Massingham says, the only logical thing to do with him is to abolish him—to make him an owner and hence a different kind of person. 'There should not be a single labourer in England who does not either cultivate a piece of land of his own or another's as initiation for his own . . . In no other way, which is not the way of high wages, can the drift from the land be stemmed. In spite of his love for the land, the

[3] As on p. 69 here, which collects a few items from one district in the Cotswolds; in 1800, six women publicly flogged for hedge-pulling; in 1816, forty people hanged in one day; in 1832, a shepherd transported for life for the customary practice of cooking a lamb that had died; and so forth.

labourer will not stay on it for money alone, but only for the love of his own which was the property of his forefathers. His workmanship and integrity will, in a saner England, fulfil a dual purpose. He will act as a filter to correct our excess of urbanism and as a check upon that looting of the land which is, through science and commercialism, turning farm into firm.'

Space forbids my resuming the chapters on the squire and the parson. I merely note the reminder (p. 86) that there was a time when greater and lesser squires united with king and guilds and peasantry to defeat the rising powers of finance; and the very moving story (pp. 119-120) of the Victorian parson, John Price—the most edifying clerical life I have read for some time.

What are the conclusions, the warnings, the moral of this book?

Conclusions: 'Look at the five representative rural figures . . . The peasant has been jocketed out of his land; the intimate association between land and craft has been lost; the yeoman has ceased to have security in his land; the squire and the parson lost, the one his personal, the other his spiritual responsibility for the village. All five figures became uprooted.'

Warnings: 'At the close of the present war it will not be possible, at any rate for an unforeseen number of years, to repeat the abandonment of our native agriculture at the close of the last. Our foreign investments having been "liquidated," our position will be no longer that of a creditor but of a debtor nation. The urban population will no longer be able to depend upon imported cheap foods as interest-payments upon non-existent foreign loans nor will foreign nations, with their fully-equipped industrial plant, be willing to receive from us exported cheap manufactured goods which they will in future make for themselves. The conclusion drawn [by our bureaucratic planners] is not a complete revision of an economic system which forced debtor countries into cut-throat competition with one another for producing food and raw materials out of exploited soils as debt-charges paid off below the cost of production. That is not the end in view; it is the commercialisation of our own countryside as a substitute for the loss of profitable fields of exploitation in distant lands, regardless of the examples in the spendthrift wastage of capital resources in soil-fertility, phosphates, timber and the like, entailed by it.'

Finally the moral. Return to the English tradition. Educate a populace for whom land is 'developed' when it is used for cinemas and 'undeveloped' when it is tilled or grazed.[4] Reinstate a peas-

[4] Cf. G. M. Young in 'The Sunday Times' of 1st November, 1942.

antry formed from our present land workers and from those townsmen who are not quite lost to the realities of the soil. Let the workers become owners. Give the craftsman security and apprenticeship. Let the squire and the parson return to a functional responsibility. Restore the 'just price.' Turn from the metropolitan to the regional. And, we may add, remember the words of the reigning Pope: 'Of all the goods that can be the object of private property, none is more conformable to nature than the land, the holding in which the family lives and from whose products it draws its subsistence in whole or part. It is in the spirit of *Rerum Novarum* to declare that, as a rule, only that stability which is rooted in one's own holding makes of the family the vital and most perfect cell of society.'

WALTER SHEWRING.

GILL'S LAST ESSAYS

OF these nine essays,[1] two are now seen for the first time, and one, the longest, is new to the present writer. *Secular and Sacred in Modern Industry* takes up the last twenty pages. Two full-size reproductions and three or four 'colophons' from his hand make the little volume more intimate and precious to his old friends and the war-economy standard of production seems to enhance rather than impair the attractiveness. The little volume contains a lot of close reasoning, many aphorisms of price, and much true intense loyalty to the Papal Encyclicals on Labour and Social Reform. We speak feelingly, having had to defend the faith of Eric Gill against those who never retain a single word of those earth-shaking documents even if they ever heeded one. On p. 13, l. 7, occurs a sentence with one *that* too many.

Who wants an antidote to the Daily Bane and other touting booby-traps for Democracy and the Proletarianisation (his word) of all things? Who wants to hear that 'the labourer's point of view is necessarily radically different from any other'? Who swallows all the second-hand sops of Midas without any rumination? Who but everyone who does not read Eric Gill.

He does indeed get down to the bases of our maladies and does it in an everyday familiar medium more deadly-undermining than

[1] 'Last Essays.' Eric Gill. With an introduction by his wife. (Cape; 5s.).