

A Great Agricultural Problem

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It is high time that the attention of all English tenant-farmers and all English landowners—who are equally interested—should be drawn to the rapidly increasing imports of French agricultural produce. A trade has grown up, silently and yet speedily, which threatens before long to interfere with the position, of farming in this country. If it continues to develop at the same rate, the English cultivator must be driven out of the market; and while the principle of free competition has firmly established itself, still, at the same time, that is no argument in favour of calmly closing our eyes, and refusing to modify the practice of farming in order that our neighbours may reap the benefit of their superior acuteness. In plain words, if the English farmer does not awaken and bestir himself, he is likely to be beaten at his own business; and he should recollect that in these days an industry once lost does not readily return. A vast and continuous stream of French cheese, French butter, French eggs, vegetables, etc. is pouring day after day across the Channel. We read that ‘our artillery and baggage waggons are largely horsed with animals from France,’ and in many counties farms are worked with cart horses imported from the opposite shore. At the same moment we are told that the live stock in this country has decreased; that beef had better be abandoned for mutton; that turnips, upon which crop so much of our farming is based, are a mistake; that corn-growing is a failure, the farms crying out for tenants; in short, that grazing pure and simple, i.e. apart from breeding, and the dairy for sending milk to London, are the only profitable sections of the business of agriculture now remaining. The drift of which is, that farming in the old style and old meaning of the word, can only be successfully carried on in those countries where, as in America, there are vast regions of cheaply rented land, from which both corn and meat can be raised with little outlay; that in countries like ours, where the area of the soil is limited, and the pressure of pecuniary burdens placed upon it enormously high, where population increases with marvellous rapidity, and constantly tends to mass itself in cities, the only profitable farming possible is that which is somewhat contemptuously called the ‘kitchen garden’ system. If this be so, then these importations of cheese, butter, and so on, must not be looked upon as merely minor matters to be safely dismissed from thought, while we rest under the ample shadow of the short-horn. They must be regarded as a premonitory sign of the future, and not altogether of evil augury. For it cannot possibly be that an increase of population, which means an increased demand for food, can be fatal to the class whose business it is to supply that food; it must rather act as

a positive benefit, if only—and here is the point—they will manage to meet the altered conditions. They are nearer to our great cities than their French competitors, consequently the transit is quicker and cheaper, and there is no sea passage, so that the advantage really lies with them if they will seize it. But for some years now they have supinely permitted the trade to pass out of their hands.

That this is a fact, may be ascertained by inquiring at the shops in any ordinary provincial town. Ask for butter, and you are supplied with what the grocer will candidly confess is Brittany. Now Brittany butter, as we shall see presently, is one of the poorest kinds that leave the Continent—that is, speaking in a general sense; there may be one or more special brands—yet poor or moderately good Brittany butter is purchased in preference, and forms the mass of the grocer's store. If asked if he has any butter made in the vicinity, he will reply that he has indeed a very small quantity sent in weekly from one or two farms, but it is wholly absorbed by three or four of his customers who are high up in the local social scale. He has also a little butter of secondary quality made in the neighbourhood; he cannot recommend it: you taste it and are disgusted. Practically, therefore, the butter supply of the town comes from abroad. Yet you are in the midst of a beautiful dairy country, green meadows with running brooks that cattle love are all around, and the cattle are there too, yet there is no butter. Why is it? Well, the milk goes to London. But surely *all* the country cannot send its milk to London—there must be an end to the quantity required some day. He has cheese? Yes, he has cheese, i.e. American or Canadian; of cheese made in the locality none; people do not like it; this is not one of those special districts where a special cheese is made, and as for the old thin cheese, why the foreign make sells three times as readily. Now change the scene to London, and proceed to a provision dépôt in any of the leading thoroughfares.

In the window will be seen the words Gruyère, Gorgonzola, Parmesan, Roquefort, Camembert, Brie, Bondon, etc., prominently displayed. A huge Gruyère with a piece cut out to exhibit its texture, several Roquefort cheeses cut in half to show the blue mould beloved by the epicure, piles of little Camembert creams, these are artistically stacked to draw customers to the door. Step in, and you are presented with a card of prices, upon which will be found a long list of French, Swiss, Italian, and German cheeses. They have Cheddar? Oh, yes; but an inspection quickly satisfies the visitor that it is not of English manufacture. Cheddar can be got, but it is not here ready for sale. Further inquiry will elucidate the fact that of the cheese eaten in London pretty nearly one-half comes from America and the other half from the Continent. Stilton holds its own; Cheddar, too, when it can be got; but the mass of the cheese is foreign. Neither is it a matter of price, for much of the Continental cheese *is* the reverse of cheap; the favourite Roquefort, for instance, is two shillings a pound. It is the

same with the butter. Here are the finer sort of Brittany (frequently sold as Dorset), fine Normandy brands, butter from Milan, if we look to the southern points of the compass; butter from Denmark, if we look to the north. In short, in this provision dépôt there is everything but English cheese and English butter. Stay, here is some Devonshire cream, some New Forest and York cream—delicacies these, of course; but as with the cheese and butter, so with the creams—Neufchâtel cream competes with them on equal terms. Then with eggs; everyone knows that really first-class new-laid eggs are often all but unprocurable—they were recently selling at 2½*d.* each, about their weight in copper. French eggs are depended upon now by all the cooks in the kingdom for pastry, frying, and every purpose short of the breakfast table. They are so much cheaper, they are easily obtained, and they are on the whole of very good quality. So much for the produce which is generally associated with the dairy, but which it appears the English dairy does *not* now supply.

Next look at the despised kitchen garden, and we may add the orchard. To Covent Garden, and to similar establishments in the great provincial cities, comes asparagus in the middle of the winter, green peas, lettuces, young potatoes, etc., etc., and all from France. These, perhaps, our climate will not permit us to grow at the same season; but this excuse will not hold good with apples. The orchards, for the most part, even in those counties usually supposed to be devoted to the culture of the apple, are, we are assured, practically left to themselves to decay or flourish as they choose. We have seen, in the country, the grass under the apple trees literally hidden with the fallen fruit which remained till partially rotten, and was then flung carelessly together in heaps to be ground into rough cider or cast to the pigs. We bought, last autumn, Blenheim-orange apples in London shops at three-halfpence each, a price which should surely make it worth while to carefully gather this crop. The result of the neglect to do so is visible in the immense importation of foreign fruit of all descriptions, and especially of preserved and dried fruits, and, it may be added, preserved vegetables. The list of preserved fruits so imported fills several pages.

Now, reflecting upon the very serious fact that the butter and cheese trade of this country is already, to a great extent, absorbed by French and Continental producers, it is clearly of the highest importance to obtain the fullest information as to the source of the supply and the reasons why it has supplanted home manufacture. Mr. Richardson's recent volume,¹ which enters into a minute description of the breeds of French cattle and methods of farming, contains, perhaps, the best materials for an estimate of this kind which has yet been placed in the hands of the public. His information is avowedly derived both from personal knowledge and from the official records of agriculture, which in France are furnished by every local authority. These local

¹ *The Corn and Cattle Producing Districts of France* by G.G. Richardson. Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878.

returns are of a more detailed character and not so strictly tabular as is the case with our own Governmental figures; they are more of the nature of reports such as would be furnished if two or three leading gentlemen in each parish were requested to write an account of what was going on around them. When to a study of these materials a wide personal experience and an intelligent method of arrangement are brought to bear, it is easy to see that the result must be valuable. The one mistake Mr. Richardson has committed is the attempt to condense too large a mass of matter into a comparatively small compass; he does not allow himself time or space to exhaust the many interesting subjects upon which he treats; but he has presented us with a series of authentic figures and facts not otherwise accessible, for which every student of the great changes agriculture is undergoing must be grateful.

To proceed direct to the points under consideration, it appears, from Mr. Richardson's statistics, that, in 1876, 600,000 cwt. of butter came to England from France. In the same year the total import of foreign butter was 1,700,000 cwt., of the value of £9,700,000. It follows that 'we draw considerably more than one-third of our foreign butter supply from France. The most important house for this export trade—the commission upon whose business in London is said to be worth £8,000 a year—is managed by a woman, and thoroughly well managed too.' These are figures which concern us directly; but there are others which concern us almost as much indirectly. It must be recollected that there are other countries besides England which consume this article; so that our dairymen, when they lose the trade at home, also lose the business they might obtain abroad. In Russia the possibilities of trade attached to the excellent qualities of such cheese as the famous Stilton are fully appreciated. The process of making Stilton, Derby, and Cheddar cheese has been studied in England by Russian agents, and these varieties are now manufactured at Moscow, and specimens have been exhibited at Continental shows. Countries requiring cheese will be supplied from somewhere; and if England declines to supply it, other nations will take her natural place.

A very great share of this butter business now falls into French hands. Besides the 600,000 cwt. sent to England, other nationalities took over 200,000 cwt. 'This exportation is made to various countries—to Belgium as well as to England—and nearly 3,000 tons go to South America and the West Indies.' The value of the total export reached £4,000,000, and, mark, 'This enormous manufacture leaves all the buttermilk, skim-milk, and manure, at home for the benefit of the country.' The practice now fast becoming universal in England of selling the milk off the farm, of course wastes all those secondary products. We are therefore losing, first, the money paid by English consumers in the great towns for butter, which now goes into foreign hands; secondly, the possible export trade which should, in part at least, be ours; and finally, we are wasting the products which are derived from buttermilk, etc., and the fertilising value of

the manure which follows its consumption. Besides the French butter, we import, vast quantities from America. And it is not a little remarkable that while we import from the United States in the north, France exports to the south of that continent, as, for example, to Rio Janeiro. Briefly, England, hitherto regarded as the finest dairy country in the world, is daily becoming dependent upon Continental and Transatlantic supplies of dairy produce; while France not only manufactures sufficient for home consumption, but exports to us and to the West. Is not this an extraordinary state of things?

Since so much of the butter now used throughout the country comes from Brittany, a few particulars as to the state of the manufacture there will be interesting. The total butter production for the province is estimated at £1,300,000 per annum.

Over a wide area, we are told, 'the manufacture of butter is yet very imperfect. The churns are of the upright form. . . . Few farms have any proper dairy attached to them, and the milk is kept and the butter made in the kitchen, which is, over a large portion of Brittany, the sleeping and living room of all the inhabitants of the farm.' Eaten immediately, the butter is good, but 'the system is bad for any butter that has to be kept, as it soon turns rancid; and as the large dealers who purchase for export have to knead it and wash it over again, it loses in this process very much of its flavour and ten per cent, of its weight.' The salt added amounts to ten per cent, of the weight. Machines are in use for kneading and washing it, worked by steam, and turn out from 2 to 6 hundredweight per hour. All this does not sound prepossessing; yet, the butter must have good intrinsic qualities, or it would never command so wide a sale. But the point of these facts lies in this, that, even with imperfect manufacture, this butter surpasses a large proportion of our own home-make, and is purchased in preference. How very inferior, then, must the English process be—or, rather, how much must this very important industry be neglected!

The finest French butter is made in Normandy; the quantity, too, is large, and the care expended great. 'In Le Bessin, near Isigny, there are farms that sell £1,000 worth of butter yearly;' and in view of the predominance given in this country to the shorthorn, it is curious to read that in that district, which takes the lead as to butter, 'the opinion of the farmers is, that the smallest cross of the shorthorns would reduce the yield of milk from twenty quarts a day, which they get now from a newly-calved cow, to fourteen or fifteen.' First-class shorthorns have, however, yielded more than this, up to twenty-eight and thirty quarts daily. 'The brand at Isigny that makes the highest price is that of M. Demagny. In 1876 his minimum price for salted butter was £7. 7s. per cwt., and his maximum £10. 10s., taken at Isigny; his sales during the year reached £160,000, mostly for export to the Brazils.' In winter Isigny butter realises from 3s. to 3s. 6d. per pound wholesale by auction in the Paris market! Such a price will seem incredible to English dairymen. Here is the secret: 'The care in the manufacture

at Isigny is something excessive, and much of the superiority of the butter is attributed to this. The hand never touches the butter, it is always beaten up in cloths; the utensils are of marvellous cleanliness, and if a drop of milk or cream falls on the floor it is at once sluiced away.' Next to Isigny comes the butter made at Gournay, in the Seine Inférieure, which in Paris reaches 2s. a pound. In Neuchâtel in 1873, 3,300 tons of butter were made, averaging on the spot £120 per ton, a total of about £400,000.

The statements in an address delivered at a meeting in London by Mr. Allender, the managing director of the Aylesbury Dairy Company, and who has also personally inspected the French butter districts, taken in connection with the above, are full of pregnant meaning. He says: 'Gournay, a great centre for Normandy butter, is a sight to see on market day. Now, the land is not better than we have in England, neither are the cows. Why do we have to pay the millions a year we do for dairy products, when our own land might produce so much more by better management? . . . English butter, even from our best districts, except from just a very few special farms, is fast becoming a thing to avoid.' It would seem as if the true course of the English dairyman should be to establish a reputation for a speciality in butter—a fine brand, like the Isigny—rather than for mere quantity. But how very far behind he is in this particular, which depends in a great measure upon the making up (as shown at Isigny), is obvious when we learn, upon the best authority, that in the whole of England and Ireland there were recently but two automatic circular butter-making machines in use, and one of these was at the Aylesbury Dairy Company's factory in London. Yet this machine is common all over the north of Europe, and even in cold and distant Finland, which one would hardly suppose to be a country of progress. The system of setting the milk in ice-water, which causes the cream to rise with extraordinary rapidity, and insures its perfect sweetness—a system now employed almost everywhere on the Continent, is also all but practically unknown in this country. Clearly, therefore, there will be much to learn before this great industry can be revived, and the English farmer must no longer look upon the foreigner with contempt.

French and Continental cheese sells in London, not because of cheapness, for much of it is expensive, but on account of its superior flavour. English farmers, finding that there was no sale, or rather no remunerative sale, for the thin poor cheese they had made from time immemorial, and which was beaten out of the market by the American article, gave up the occupation in disgust, and gladly sold their milk. The French farmer competes with the cheap American sorts by establishing a reputation for special qualities, and experience has shown that this course is successful. Should not a lesson be learnt from this? The great Gruyère, for instance, is as well known in London now as Double Gloucester, and its manufacture has been attended with the happiest results in the increased prosperity of the agriculturist. The French Gruyère cheese (there is also an

important Swiss make) comes from Franche Comté, and is the produce of the small farmers on the slopes of the Jura range. Writing of the system pursued, Mr. Richardson says:

As the cheeses weigh three-quarters of a hundred-weight, and are as big round as a cart-wheel, the milk from many cows is required to make one. No farmer has sufficient milk at one time, few indeed having as many as three cows, and it takes three hundred quarts to make a cheese. The inhabitants of the village therefore unite, and each sends in what quantity he can to the general factory. The amount he sends is put to his credit, and on the balance of the sales being made up, he receives an amount of money in proportion to the quantity of milk he has supplied. In 1854 there were 1,250 factories in the two departments of the Doubs and the Jura, producing cheese to the value of £480,000. Now (1876) the amount is quite up to £1,200,000, and the quality is considered equal to that of the Swiss Gruyère.

Now there are places in England where great commons are still to be found, fed off by the cattle of the burgesses of the adjacent town, who have the right to turn out two or three cows to graze. The system has been severely condemned, and the majority of the old common lands have been inclosed—that is in itself a different question. But did we ever hear of an English district where there were a number of small farmers combining together in this way, and thereby obtaining for themselves a reputation for a special product in far distant countries, while at the same time putting, money in their purse? There is scarcely a village, states Mr. Richardson, which has not got its factory, and this manufacture ‘brings comfort to a district in which, until its extension, the people were sunk in misery.’

It does not follow that we are to slavishly imitate; it may be that the processes by which many foreign cheeses are produced are scarcely practicable here; but is there no originality, no invention amongst us, no power of modification? The cheese known as Bondons, which obtains an extensive sale in England, is made in Neufchâtel (Seine Inférieure), and this again brings comparative wealth to the inhabitants. The annual make reaches 4,500 tons, of the value of £270,000. These small cheeses are turned out by machinery at the rate of 1,200 per hour. The soil of Neufchâtel over wide-areas is poor, a large part is covered with forest, and the population is but 81,000, who derive an income from the cheese and butter of £10 ‘per head for every man, woman, and child, besides the value of the calves, the skim milk, and the whey.’ The Brie cheese is another kind well known in England; it weighs about a pound, and three quarts of milk are used in the manufacture; the price wholesale is from 1s. to 1s. 3d. per pound. The total production is about £400,000 worth—£4,000 worth are often sold on a single market day. There is a species of Brie which is made from much richer milk, and sells retail at over 2s. per pound. The Camembert now seen in every shop in London comes from Normandy, and it

must be a profitable manufacture, since one of the largest makers, M. Cyrille Payncl, can pay for his 500 acres of grass £3. 10s. per acre. This gentleman in 1875 sent 9,090 dozen of this tiny variety to Paris, which were sold for £3,000. Roquefort cheese, which is now so common in the windows, can hardly be compared with any English produce because it is made from the milk of ewes. It is none the less important to know the large profit that must arise from this business. From each ewe it is calculated that 24 lbs. of cheese are yearly obtained: this is a low average, and whole flocks may be found which yield 55 lbs. per head. Roquefort in London is sold at 2s. a pound. In one case 8 cwt. of cheese was made from the milk of thirteen ewes; 'the cheese from each ewe sold for 30s., the wool for 4s. 6d., and the lamb, sold at a few days old, 4s. 6d.,' i.e. a total revenue in a single season from a single sheep of £1. 19s. About 3,500 tons of this cheese are made in the neighbourhood of Roquefort. The mode of manufacture is curious in the extreme, and it is matured in caves through which a cold draught passes. For the interesting details Mr. Richardson's book should be consulted.

The foregoing facts suggest some very serious questions, which the English farmer will do well to consider. Why is it that French farmers can make a brand of batter selling at 3s. a pound? Why is it that on the one hand a race of the smallest of small farmers can send out a noble cheese which has a sale hundreds of miles from its place of origin, and a farmer with 500 acres, a large holding for France, paying 70s. per acre, can put £3,000 worth of cheese in the market? Why is it that agriculture in France becomes more flourishing every year, the common labourers saving money, while in England there is constant complaint and restlessness? The fault here is generally traced to the high price and scarcity of labour; but the same difficulty is experienced across the Channel. Throughout France the cry is that the population does not increase as it should do, and 'if society at large is disgusted by the small increase of the people, the farmers feel it more acutely and directly.' There is a distinct transfer of labour from the country to the towns. Every effort is made by prizes offered at provincial shows, etc., to induce labourers to remain at farm work, but in vain; they still drift to the cities, leaving the farmers shorthanded. 'At times of pressure farmers must offer high wages to get their work done: as much as from 3s. 6d. to 5s. a day (it must be recollected that money is relatively of higher value than in England), with board in addition.' The men used to be thankful to sit down with the farmer and partake of his fare; now the farmer's food is not good enough, and they insist on better than their employer eats. Further, 75 per cent, of the agricultural labourers, either personally or through their parents, possess an interest in a small piece of land which renders them far more independent than ours are. Add to this that the conscription for the army takes away just the prime of the young men, and it is clear that the position of the French farmer in respect to the labour question is, if anything, worse than that

of the English. Another oft-quoted argument in explanation of the productive power of France is derived from the subdivision of land. Mr. Richardson does not bear out this view. He says:

No life is so hard as that of the peasant working his own land; and the change from such toil—which, at the year's end, by the most niggardly starvation system of living, leaves less money than could be lived out of easy work and good living in towns—will perhaps tend to take the children of peasant proprietors out of the old groove.

In one commune of 2,080 acres there are 270 proprietors, but there are 5,348 lots; and each owner has about 20 minute estates, all separated from each other.

At Estrées St. Denim, in Oise, the lots had got so small that each holding was only about thirteen square perches. The owners agreed to have the land put together, and set out in lots of from half to three-quarters of an acre, and then sold to the highest bidder (only previous owners to bid?); the value was doubled, trebled, and in some instances decupled.

Nevertheless^{2*} these small holdings pay; but it does not follow, when the accompanying drawbacks are considered, and the difference in the temperament of the English peasant allowed for—as also the climate, for ours is not so suitable for the fruit, which is a great staple in these garden-farms—that they are desirable on a large scale in this country. One cause of the prosperity of French farmers appears to arise from their immense capacity for work, personal labour, which is shared in by their wives and families. Yet even this trait is departing: the daughters of French farmers, no more than those of English, care for farm labour. Those young men who settle in or inherit farms there find a difficulty in getting wives: the girls are shy of the farmhouse life because of its attendant work. 'It seems that farmers do not find their daughters willing to lead the lives their mothers have led.' That remark is as applicable to English rural communities as to French. So that there is not such a wide divergence as might have been supposed between the general conditions of farming in the two countries.

It would almost seem as if France was non-progressive, since machinery has made but little way. Mowing and reaping machines are slowly coming into use because mowing is so much dearer than formerly; but one of 'our large English firms has taken a steam thrashing-machine from show to show for the last four years, without getting an order for a single one.' Yet the actual progress has been marvellous. Before the great Revolution the description of the country, left by an English agriculturist who examined it, is a perpetual repetition of 'sandy wastes,' 'barren heaths,' marshes, etc. In Normandy he did not see a well-cultivated acre in the whole province. 'He little thought,' writes Dronyn de l'Huys, 'how largely Great Britain would become dependent on this same

² * [This ' Nevertheless' is worth noting.—ED.]

country for much of its food.' In 1745, a loaf made of heather was laid before the King, with the remark that that was what his subjects were living on. It has been estimated that the annual value of French agricultural produce has increased £100,000,000 in the last twenty-five years. It must be recollected that France grows her own corn, and sends no money out of the country to purchase bread.

Is there not here a great and weighty problem? It is clear, to put the practical phases foremost, that every pound of butter and cheese imported into England from the Continent is a direct loss to English agriculturists, and will soon be felt by landowners who hitherto have found their sheet anchor in grass. The French farmer, who keeps his buttermilk, whey, and consequent manure at home, must do more good to the land than his English competitor, who sells off his milk and loses all those sources of further fertility.

The example of France proves one most important fact—that the 'old countries,' as distinguished from the backwoods, prairies, and gigantic sheep-walks of the South and West, are *not* exhausted. There is fertility sufficient in them still, and productive power enough to support great populations, and even to export to the West itself. This is encouraging, while it proves at the same time that the land in England does not yield what it might be made to do. It appears that the success of French agriculture compared with ours is not due to any extraordinary difference of legal conditions; good results are equally obtained from large and small holdings, and among the leading agriculturists there attempts have been made to check the minute subdivision of land. Indeed, it would seem as if the only real reason why a large estate is not cultivated so closely as a little garden plot, is the amount of capital it would require. It is tolerably certain that in some way or other our farming system is deficient in its practical management, quite irrespective of legislative enactment, otherwise the prospect of profit would draw more capital to it. For the reason that farming in France is carried on under conditions of soil, labour, taxation, etc. far more nearly approximating to those in this island than exist in the United States or any other great agricultural country, its present state and progress are deserving of special study. As affording a mine of facts, figures, and apt illustrations conveying a vivid idea of what is passing in the territory of a rising agricultural competitor, Mr. Richardson's book should be thoughtfully perused. It must not be forgotten that the question of the future of the huge populations massing themselves in Europe is in effect the question of food.

RICHARD JEFFERIES.