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Russell, George Villa

IRELAND, AGRICULTURE AND THE WAR: AN OPEN LETTER TO IRISH FARMERS,

By the Editor of the "Irish Homestead."

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IRELAND, AGRICULTURE AND THE WAR.

TO IRISH FARMERS.—AN OPEN LETTER.

I feel impelled this week to speak to you personally and directly on the circumstances brought about by the war which affect you as farmers, because from reports which have reached me by many channels, public and private, I am certain that immense numbers of you are unaware of, or do not realise, the new situation created, and that time is hurrying on rapidly to a point where a light will beat strongly on you and all your doings and the attention of the nation will be concentrated upon your class and the way in which you discharge your functions in the national life. You all know that half the world is at war. Many of you realise it painfully and intimately through brothers, sons, kin or friends who are actual participants in the fighting. In that sense you need no more reminder that the world is at war, but you do not yet realise that you are more than onlookers, that you are called on to be participants in the struggle, not as combatants, but as part of that other noble army whose business it is in many ways to heal up the wounds of the combatants, to make good the wastage in society, and to ameliorate the evil effects of the war. What those working under the Red Cross do for all combatants alike, without distinction between friend or foe of their country, you are called upon to do for society at large. Your occupation, always necessary in times of peace, in time of war, in periods of great human necessity stands out prominently and assumes its eternal position as the foremost, the most necessary, of all human occupations. The longer war continues the more does farming, nor-

mally hidden behind a hundred other occupations, come to the front. Men think little in times of plenty of the labours which bring them the food that enables them to live and work; but let there be shortage and a wild apprehension springs up in society and people realise that it is upon you and your labours that they depend altogether. You become the staff on which they lean. Every other occupation almost might disappear, but yours never, without humanity disappearing, and any failure of yours in time of necessity to equal the need of the world inflicts the most terrible suffering on the world. Any neglect of duty in a time of necessity would be as ignoble as the act of a Red Cross contingent who on the battlefield neglected to attend to the wounded. The longer the war continues the more insistent will be the claims of the world upon you who can farm, you over whose fields no armies have marched, to supply the shortage of food brought about by the withdrawal of millions of your class in Europe to take part in a redder reaping than any the world has hitherto known.

“ Is, then, the necessity for food production that has arisen really so great,” you may ask, “ that we must upset the normal routine of our industry? Are you, who say this, one of the many scaremongers whose souls flare out in wild apprehensions and panic if anything unusual happens in the world? Is there really fear of shortage of the food supply of the world? Are people in the islands in which we live in danger of famine? ” I can only say that those whose business it is to search most deeply into the sources of supply are those who are most deeply concerned about the future and the food supply of the civil population in Europe. I can only retail to you some facts which I believe to be accurate, and you can form your own judgment. In theory, the European countries at war can put somewhat over forty million persons into the field. The law of conscription, which prevails over Europe, allows few able-bodied men to evade the obligation of leaving their normal occupa-

tion when called upon by the government to defend their country. The gigantic extent of the war being waged at present is forcing Germany, France, Austria, Russia, Servia and Belgium to call more and more on the reserves of humanity in these countries up to the utmost limit, from boys of eighteen up to elderly men, to decide the destinies of half the world. So great are the problems to be decided. So great is the number of people gathered to force a solution of the questions at issue. From these islands, from our own country, we are sending larger numbers of men than have ever before in our history left our shores on a martial enterprise. Even from Australia, Canada and New Zealand, from the uttermost ends of the earth, men are journeying, drawn on by this maelstrom which is swallowing up our humanity. A very large part, perhaps the largest part of these armies, have been called from agricultural occupations; only the women and children and the very old are left in the warring countries in Europe to till and harvest as best they can. You know what production you might expect from your own farms if all the able-bodied men from eighteen to forty-five were called away and the work was left to your wives and children and the elders who remained. Besides this certain decline in production in the future there has been actual great destruction of crops in the field. Armies stretching over hundreds of miles, in their rushings to and fro across the continent, make havoc of the land they fight over. Though the last harvest, tilled in times of peace and gathered in war, was a full one, anticipation of future shortage is affecting prices. They have gone up steadily, and will rise still more. It is towards the middle and latter end of this year that those who have thought most over this question look with painful apprehension. They fear, nay, they are certain of a shortage in the food supply of the world. They fear for the workers in the towns. They anticipate food riots and a red conflagration breaking out of men and women maddened by the hunger of their families and their own hunger.

It will be too late then to think of remedial measures. Whatever must be done to prevent disaster or to relieve it of its worst terrors and make it bearable must be done now. Food cannot be created in a day or a week the way coal can be dug out of the earth or oil drawn from the wells. Meat and wheat, butter, fruit, vegetables, all must be prepared in anticipation many months beforehand, or years beforehand in the case of cattle. At first when the war broke out these economic results of the war were not clearly apprehended. Military requirements necessarily came before everything else. It was vaguely supposed that, so far as the food supply in these islands was concerned, it simply depended on keeping the trade routes open; a few weeks would rid the seven seas of enemy cruisers: and then we could draw upon the world for our granary as usual. Well, we can draw upon the world and prices are rising. It is impossible in the modern world, where countries are economically interdependent, to shelter people in one nation from a commotion which rages fiercely among neighbouring nations. Prices rise in harmony everywhere, and when there is competition over a continent and a shortage of supply, no country, however open its ports, can expect to live as usual. The question of food supply and food prices is further complicated by the uncertainty of receiving supplies. We doubt the ability of enemy submarines to make effective a blockade of ports in Great Britain and Ireland. But the sinking, with loss of life, of half-a-dozen ships out of one thousand would have a great moral effect, which means that shipowners and sailors and insurance companies would be seriously perturbed, and wages, freight and insurance would be raised, with consequent further effect upon the cost of cargoes to customers. By the law of affinities misfortunes for the public never come singly. The attack on the Suez Canal is conceived for the same purpose. The sinking of one or two ships there also would produce a moral effect on shipowners and sailors. Every one of these things tends to increase prices of food stuffs and

to make more imperative the necessity for the home farmer to produce more food stuffs.

"It is all very well to talk about producing more food stuffs," you may answer me, "but how are we to do it? We also suffer from scarcity or high prices in the supply of raw materials of our industry. One-eighth of the horse supply of Ireland has become military fuel. Agricultural labour has also gone to the front, largely through recruiting or the calling up of reservists. The fertilisers we use are more expensive, so are seeds, so are feeding stuffs. Even granting that we might procure the seeds, the fertilisers and the feeding stuffs, how is an increase in tillage and food production to be combined with a shortage in labour and in horses for agricultural work? You are asking of us impossibilities. We who tilled before worked hard enough, and you now ask us to slave." I might answer that I know that you are human and brotherly-hearted enough to other human beings actually to slave to relieve them if the hungry or starving people were in your own parish, visible to your eyes, and were actually dependent, to your own knowledge, for food on you and you alone. Slave, of course, in that case you would. I am trying to lend you glasses to make you see things at a distance as if they were close. You may know that already the cost of living for workers in the towns has gone up twenty-five per cent. That is, the wage of the worker who has twenty shillings a week at the present time can only procure food and coal and other necessaries to the amount which fifteen shillings would have purchased before the war. It is practically equivalent to a drop of five shillings a week in the income of such a household. That is, somehow, food or heat or light must be restricted in the family to the extent of five shillings a week. The threatened blockade if effective to any degree, actually or morally, will knock some more shillings off such incomes weekly; and through it all will be going on the exhaustion of the last harvest of the

world and the prospect of meagre production in the warring countries in Europe. If you exercise your imaginations, if you allow your hearts to brood a little on all that implies, on all that is threatened, you will see what I mean when I say your industry is coming into prominence. It is taking its rightful place as the most important of any, and it is for you, farmers, to take the place your profession and duty make obligatory on you as a great auxiliary to the Red Cross in the trouble of the world, they relieving the wounded and you working with all your energy to feed the hungry, and not to have it on your conscience later on that it was through lethargy of yours that some children may have died of malnutrition in the cities of your country.

I have shown, I think, that I realise your difficulties with regard to labour, horses and the raw materials of your industry. But I think, and my belief is confirmed by the opinion of the greatest agricultural experts—men who are not only farming but who think about farming, and who enquire beyond their own parish into the sources of supply and the substitutes and expedients to be adopted—that you could still increase production and do it with honour and profit to yourselves. I am loth in moments of great human necessity to mention the word profit along with the word honour, but it must be mentioned because a large number of you are poor and it would be impossible for many to go to the expense of increasing production unless they were certain that they would receive a return which would recoup their expenditure. So I say that there is no production of beef, mutton, bacon, wheat, oats, potatoes, milk or butter possible in these islands which would not amply in the coming year repay the cost of labour, implements and raw materials. You have seen already the improved tendency of prices for your stock and produce, and you may rest assured that while the war lasts that tendency will persist and for nigh a year after the war—until men can get back to their ancient labours on the land in

Europe. I do not advise you as to the kind of crop you should produce; the greatest practical expert in agriculture could make no general statement which would apply to all farmers and all kinds of land. The thing you have to do is to make your farms produce to the utmost you know them capable of bearing. Nothing will produce less than grass. Grass has borne in times of peace all it can do. The uttermost stock that grass land can bear has been calculated, and every farmer knows to a single unit of stock what quantity his grazing lands will support if untilled. By this method no increase is possible. It is only by tillage methods that the acres which feed one cow will feed three, and it is tillage of one kind or another you must adopt if you are to produce more as the times demand. The agricultural instructors in your county can advise you in these matters if you venture upon crops you have not hitherto grown. Our own contributor, Mr. Wibberley, has made famous a system which he calls continuous cropping, which will, he has proved, enable the farmer to double, or even in some cases to treble, his milk production or the number of fattening cattle his acres will support. Most of you are familiar with Mr. Wibberley's methods. His articles and book on the subject are available, and he himself and others trained by him can be consulted up to their limit of human energy. They do not dread work but invite it. So that, so far as technical advice is concerned, you are amply equipped in Ireland.

"But," you will say, "knowledge will not enable us to produce if labour is lacking." Well, that it is also possible in large measure to overcome by the use of efficient implements and power machinery. "Are we to buy all these implements, cultivators, disc harrows, potato diggers, reapers and binders, steam threshers, and what not," you will ask? "That would be a huge expenditure." Yes, it would, if small farmers had to buy them for individual use. It would not pay. But it pays the big

tillage farmer to use such implements, and it amply pays the small farmer to use them if he only pays for the use of them a cost proportionate to the extent he cultivates. That use by the poorest farmers is made possible and profitable by means of co-operative societies. Societies of small farmers have been able without feeling the cost to erect and equip with expensive machinery creameries to the number of many hundreds. Can any small farmer who is a member of a creamery say he has really felt his share of the burden of putting it up? The banks have aided you by cheap credit in erecting your creameries, and you have paid off, or are paying off, the loans from the banks and are richer all the time by the increased value of your milk. You can just as easily procure through co-operation all the implements and machinery I have mentioned, hold it in common and let it to the members for fractional sums, and you will find in every case that the use of the machines will enable you to do much more work at less expense than when you were employing antiquated implements and hand labour. As the manual labourer leaves the land, the machine comes in to supply the power, and it will enable you to pay the labourers who remain a better wage and yet produce more and more profitably from your land.

All this has been proved by farmers in many parts of Ireland who have adopted the new methods. It is for you at least to inquire into these methods. It is, I think I have shown, your obvious human duty in a great human crisis to play your part in it as men, doing your work, the honourable toil demanded from you, as soldiers and sailors do their less happy but no more necessary duty in the trenches or on the perilous sea, where sudden death lurks below the shining waters. You have not any more than those who bear the Red Cross to ask yourselves the rights or the wrongs of the war. It is your duty as it is theirs to relieve human suffering or want no matter by what race

it is felt. Your energy or your lethargy in production will not help or hinder one side in this terrible conflict. It will help or weaken both alike, for increased production or lessened production in the harvests of the world affect all countries finally, prices tending to find their level as water does. So those questions of the right or wrong of the war which have been raised in certain quarters in Ireland do not affect the duty of the farmer as farmer however they may affect his conduct as citizen or politician. In a very special sense the well-being of the Irish people will depend, while the war lasts and for some time after, on the enterprise of the farmers. For the industrial centres in the North are suffering, and will suffer still more as the meagre supply of flax which has been doled out in half-time work comes to an end. From Belgium no flax will come to eke out Irish supplies. What escaped destruction in the battles over the flax-growing centres was taken to Germany. From Russia little came, and it is unlikely indeed that much will come, so one great Irish industry on which many thousands of Irish people depended for their means of living has been stricken and will be in a shaky condition for a year, or perhaps for two years and may be longer, and all the people employed in supplying the necessities of the workers in the Irish textile industries will suffer in their turn through the lessening amount of wages spent. There has been a kind of fictitious prosperity in some towns brought about by orders from the Admiralty or War Office, but the spending of money in that way is like the spending of capital. While the capital lasts the spender may live up to his old standard or beyond it even, but when the expenditure of capital comes to an end there is absolute destitution. Unless some new form of wealth production comes in, or unless some old industry is revitalised to replace the decrepit industries, the nation will be in a very bad way indeed, and if nothing of the kind happens in Ireland, we will for many years during and after the war have our town population in a state of extreme

poverty. The war will have destroyed all the hopes of increased prosperity based in late years on the returns of the Irish trade in imports and exports.

The one Irish industry which can swell and expand and create wealth sufficient to offset the inevitable wanting for a time of our manufacturing industries is agriculture. Increased production of wealth in the land leads to increased consumption and the consequent employment of people in the towns to supply the demands of the country producers. In spite of all the talk about capturing German trade, the real truth is, and it cannot be controverted by any feather-headed economists, that when a continent, and that the greatest industrial wealth creating centre in the world, is at war, and production ceases, the power of consumption ceases. Such nations not being able to produce or sell, are not able to buy except by using capital, and neutral countries unable to sell their produce are also limited in their purchases. The markets of the world while the war continues and some time after will be poor markets except for the farmer, whose products none can dispense with, and the makers of armaments, who will make their fortunes while the war lasts. I would like to think that the terms of peace will put it out of the power of the makers of engines of destruction to make any more fortunes, but I am afraid that, not only during the war, but long after, makers of munitions of war will be feverishly engaged in replacing the wastage of battleships, torpedoes, guns, rifles, shells and other scientific inventions of the devil. Ireland will have little or no share in this work, and the Irish farmer must be the Atlas who will for a time support the Irish world. After the war is over, men will be returning in hundreds of thousands to industrial life, and they will find the constriction of trade so great that it will be years, may be, before they are reabsorbed. If they leave their country in despair they will never return. The one hope for helping Ireland over the darkening abyss of the next years lies in the

increased activity of farmers, if they will rise to the need of the moment. They can increase production to the utmost they are capable of, and can market all they can produce. The distributive trade at least should not suffer if farmers do their duty, and the distributive houses can, if custom is good in the country, keep many manufacturing firms employed. Ireland, if only the farmers worked energetically, could bear the shock of the war better than its mighty industrial neighbour.

I have spoken of increased production by the farmers as a duty. The word duty implies obligation. In a merely technical and legal sense Irish farmers have no obligations connected with the land they occupy other than the payment of their rent or annuities. But there is another sense in which their obligations to the nation are very real, and if these obligations are not fulfilled, Irish farmers as a class will suffer just as surely as if they had the reputation of not paying their legal debts and were refused credit on all sides. Irish farmers appealed to the nation to support them in their efforts first to have security of tenure and to have tribunals created which would fix the fair rental farmers should pay, and after that they asked the nation to back up their great policy of land purchase. The nation supported farmers in their struggle and secured legislative sanction for the changes they desired. Public credit was pledged to enable the gigantic financial operations connected with land purchase to be carried through. Why was all this done? It was not because farmers were really the poorest class in Ireland. At all times, even to-day, even in Dublin, the capital city of this country, many thousands of urban workers lived and live in a state of wretchedness and poverty which could hardly have been paralleled and certainly not exceeded even in the worst of the congested districts. The Great Father has His many mansions in the heavens and the Devil has his on earth. In Dublin alone twenty thousand families live in one room each, in a state of foetid squalor which you

could hardly imagine. The public aid given to your class was not given because you were the poorest class in the community, but because public aid given to agriculture promised to repay the nation by an increasing production of wealth which would finally affect the urban workers in Ireland. Directly it seemed the State could find no way of making the poor in Irish towns wealth producers, so they were passed over, but aid given to you promised a return to the nation. Statesmen were told of the magic of proprietorship and that once you owned the land you occupied you would immediately increase production, you would improve your methods, till more, pay labour better and be better customers for the decaying urban industries in Ireland. The moral obligation as a class you owe to the nation is to help it in its need, as it helped you in your need.

It cannot be said that these prophecies of increased production have been fulfilled. Tillage has steadily declined year by year since the Land Acts came into operation. Less labour has been employed. You are not altogether responsible for this. The decline in prices for foodstuffs which had been going on since the New World poured the produce of its virgin soil into the markets of the Old World made it difficult indeed for farmers in the Old World to compete. You were unorganised for business purposes, are still, three-quarters of you, unorganised to buy, manufacture, and market in that large economic manner which in modern times is required for successful business. Technically, you were uneducated. Methods of farming almost primitive, together with a business policy which split up your buying and selling into petty and fractional enterprises, could not hope to make farming a success even on the most fertile land, even if it was burdened with neither rent nor annuity. That has been changed since the beginning of the century. You have in Ireland access to technical knowledge. You have a body of extremely able organisers instructing you in the co-operative

methods of doing your business which your rivals in other lands had so successfully adopted. I do not blame you for the decline of tillage in the past, for the stagnant statistics in regard to production. But I do say that if from this year forward there is not a great improvement, you will have absolutely no moral claim on the Irish nation for a use of national credit to aid you to purchase the yet unpurchased land. You have to-day access to technical knowledge. Co-operative societies for purchase, manufacture and marketing are easily organised. You have markets crying out for all you can send and offering prices for your produce such as you never dreamed of a year before. More than this, you have a great national necessity for the products of your industry. It is not merely the normal impetus towards wealth production which is expected of you but very definite action by you to do your utmost as human beings to feed the hungry and to create plenty, so far as you can, in a world where certainly, and for all you can do, there will not be enough to go round.

You do greatly desire that the policy of land purchase shall be completed. It will be difficult with a national debt doubled or perhaps trebled after the war is ended to finance future purchases on such easy terms as past purchases. Public credit will not be so good. The more a man borrows the more has he to pay for the accommodation he receives. The more national indebtedness grows, the more expensive does it become to borrow money for national purposes. If you read the papers you will see that truth illustrated in the terms of the war loan. Well, after the war is over, with a national debt doubled or trebled, with industries crippled, and a myriad social problems created by the backwash of the tidal wave of militarism to be solved, what do you think of your chances of getting the State to increase its indebtedness on your account, if it appears that the national necessity found you unmoved, that although the Press rang with the cries of people

affected by the scarcity of food supplies, you went on as before, producing neither more nor less, than you accepted whatever services the nation could render to your class but did not stir in the nation's need to render any service to it? You could make no claim, nor as a class would you have any claim on the nation. If the past policy was justified by its results, if you increased production, if you had manfully served the nation, then, I think, a good case could be made out for continuance of the policy of land purchase. The industry which stood the strain of war best, which increased its output, and had been a strong factor in the powers of endurance of the nation, that industry would be certain of preferential treatment by the nation. You will be judged as a class, not as individuals. The statistical columns in Irish Blue Books will be merciless witnesses about you as a class, and therefore it is necessary that you should realise, as a class, that the right method now of fighting for the completion of land purchase is to make your land produce more food. Political methods will not help you in the future one jot in this matter if your industry has taken out of the mouths of your advocates the great argument that ownership led to increased agricultural production and would benefit the nation. If that argument fails your advocates, if you request aid and confess no obligations, the nation will turn from you and devote itself to the amelioration of the conditions of the long neglected workers in Irish towns.

I would regret with a personal passion that your class should cease to be predominant in our national life. I believe that country is happiest and has the most moral and stable life where agriculture predominates among the industries. A fine life is possible for humanity working on the land, bronzed by the sun and wind, living close to nature, affected by its arcane influences, which bring about essential depth and a noble simplicity of character. To create a rural civilisation is a great ideal. There is another life, fine in its way, where humanity, collected in the cities,

has exalted urban civilisation by the arts and sciences until the cities are beautiful and healthy and the life is quickened by intellect. The first civilisation it is in our power to create in a generation at its best. The second for us would indeed be a long labour, and if we turned from the task of building up a rural civilisation to making the urban life predominant, Ireland would wait many a long year combating the alcoholic intelligence which rules in its towns and which has made them so generally corrupt in their administration and so mean, dirty and disorderly in their character. These things will have to be fought, and urban life will demand its just share of national interest, but we will move a hundred times more rapidly to national prosperity and happiness if we try to make our civilisation predominantly rural. There will be a better race in Ireland, stronger men and comelier women, and we will be less subject to shock by the tidal ebb and flow of the industrial world, with its slumps in trade, its feverish and transient prosperities, and its dependence upon factors and forces outside Ireland and beyond possibility of control by us. I have fought your battles and worked for many years to bring about a rural civilisation in Ireland, and I think I should be accounted as a friend, and as a friend I give you this frank and friendly advice about your duty now and have tried to show how your future status in Ireland depends on your actions in this year of crisis and peril. What I have said may irritate some of you, but that I cannot help. I would never have been worth my salt as champion of your co-operative movement if I was not as ready to tell you unpleasant truths as I was to tell them to your enemies. I have no desire to irritate you, but only to help you and your cause by telling you what many people are murmuring to-day, and what will be an outcry against you to-morrow, if you do not heed the warning. I subscribe myself your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.



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