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# Intensive Farming in Flanders

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farmers' savings, and tempting them by promises of high dividends, only to swindle them.

Reviewing the causes which contribute to keep the small agriculturist on the soil in Flanders, it must be said that, with all his ability and love of the land, he would hardly be able to struggle against all the adversities that a farmer has to face nowadays, were it not for the support he finds in the traditions and manner of life of his country. The conditions of land tenure are certainly the most important; but the help which the peasant derives from men of science, the low rates of transport on the railways, the market-places in the large towns, the weekly fairs, and, above all, the spirit of sociability and co-operation which has been retained in the Flemish villages since mediaeval times—all these are so many causes which help him to retain his connection with the land. Yet I have no desire to represent the Flemish tillers of the soil as a modern Arcadia. On the contrary, they are in need of many serious changes, above all in land tenure. The land, which is mostly in the hands of the rich, is rented too high, and the rents, as de Laveleye pointed out, are increased so rapidly that the peasants are very far from deriving from the land all the wealth which their wonderful skill and labour deserve. Besides, the land is exposed to all sorts of speculation. Again the farmer wants much more leisure and education, and much less taxation. He works too hard, and the life he lives is too poor. The progress and the wonders of modern civilisation do not reach him. The necessity of urgent change is thus apparent in Flanders, as it is all the world over. But the main point is that the Flemish system of small farms and intensive culture has kept the population from deserting the land. In consequence, the cost of living is much lower than in countries which have to import their food, when it unavoidably becomes a matter of speculation for swarms of middlemen.



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milk a day, as I could ascertain from the cards delivered by the Co-operative Dairy to acknowledge the daily receipts. There were, besides, two heifers, two calves, two young bulls, one horse, two old pigs and twelve young ones. Some poultry were running about. All the human beings on the farm (four in the family and one labourer), and all their live-stock, found their food on the land belonging to this farm, although it covered, with the additional plot, less than eighteen acres. At a distance of six miles from Ghent, the farmer finds no advantage in sending his milk to town, and prefers to take it to the Co-operative Creamery for butter. There the cream is taken off by means of a separator, and the skimmed milk is returned to the farmer, who uses it for fattening his cattle. I saw the cards delivered every week from the Co-operative Creamery, and it appeared that the farmer's account for the butter sold by the Creamery amounted to *£2* 10s. per week in January, which represents a good income for the small quantity of land that was held in this case. Altogether, the Co-operative Creamery is highly spoken of by the farmers. It would be difficult to find out the total product of the eighteen acres. Very probably the farmer could not tell himself. At any rate, for butter alone he gets about ,£130 from his four cows every year. Such results are obtained, of course, only in small farming and only by means of very hard work.

In visiting Flemish farmers, I found, however, that the women ^work too hard, and therefore have no time left to render their homes a little more comfortable. Close contact with the Englishwoman would teach the Flemish peasant-woman how to make the living-room more cheerful. The absence of cosiness in the houses is striking, and no progress seems to have been made for the last thirty years. All these small farmers have money, for they represent the most thrifty and saving portion of the population. Unfortunately, unscrupulous company promoters and bogus bankers make the same ravages as in France. They are perpetually attacking the small

for industrial purposes—such as colza, flax, chicory, hops, &c. Owing to the variety of cultures, the fields in Flanders retain all the year round their pleasing aspect. Immediately after the cereal crops have been taken in, the soil is re-occupied by some sort of plants for a catch crop. It need hardly be said that on such farms of from five to eight acres a horse is not always kept. The ploughing and the harrowing are often done by hiring a ploughman, and the remaining work is done with the spade. No labourer is kept in such cases; it is the husband, the wife, and the children (after they have left school) who work, and they all work hard. Even the farm dog is kept more as a worker than as a watch; he works at the wheel of the well to pump water, he helps to cart the manure to the field, and, aided by the farmer, pulls the loaded cart to market.

## IV.

A still higher class of farmers are those who own or hold from fifteen to twenty acres of land. We visited one such farm, which my friends considered as typical of this class. It comprises six hectares (sixteen acres), which are rented at *£30* a year, with an additional small piece of land elsewhere, rented separately; and two items only, butter and fattened cattle, are produced here for sale. Farmers, as a rule, do not like to be questioned about their incomes; but what the man and his wife told me themselves was sufficiently instructive. They had 12 acres under the plough—4 1/2 acres under wheat, four fields of 1 3/4 acres each under oats, clover, potatoes, and carrots respectively, and 1 1/4 acres under beetroot. However, owing to the catch crops, each field was meant to give two crops a year. This is the rule all over Flanders. Thus rye or wheat, sown in October and harvested in July, is followed by a crop of turnips which will be dug up in January. In the sheds we saw four milch cows—splendid creatures, which gave 150 litres (132 quarts) of



## I.

THE necessity of growing more foodstuffs in this country has perhaps never been so evident as it is now. That the population of these islands does not obtain from its land all that it could is no longer contested. Thus the question arises—Cannot we take advantage of the considerable numbers of Belgians, especially from Flanders, to whom we are giving hospitality, to learn something about their methods of intensive farming? Could not, let us say, several County Councils, especially in those counties where there are patches of a lighter soil, establish a number of small farms, upon which Flemish farmers would show us what they get from the land, and how they manage to get it?

Anyone who will refer to the splendid book of Seebohm Rowntree, "Lessons from Belgium," will see that there is no shame to take such lessons. Belgium obtains from its 4,000,000 acres of cultivated land no less than ,£80,000,000 of home-grown foodstuffs, which means £20 on the average from each acre of the cultivated area, whereas the Danes, whose agriculture is also intensive, obtain only *£6* per acre of the cultivated area, the French only *£5* 9S., and Great Britain only *£4.* Of course, everyone knows that there are in this country admirably managed farms, which could be taken as models for all Europe. But it is not upon the exceptions that the richness of the country is based: it depends much more upon the yield of the mass of the small farms. My studies of the small farms of Flanders during several visits before the war have convinced me that in Belgium, as elsewhere, the high returns from the land are due to the great mass of the small farmers.

The two provinces of Flanders, Western and Eastern, with their average population of 762 souls per square mile (891 in the eastern portion), belong to the most densely inhabited portions of Europe. Their population has remained to a great extent agricultural, and not only all the food required by the in-

habitants was obtained till lately from the soil, but foodstuffs were exported in large quantities. At a time when complaints about " the rural exodus" were heard on all sides, Flanders remained an exception. With the aid of friends in Ghent, who, from their infancy, knew the life of the farmers around them, I visited some of the farms and collected materials which may be of interest to English readers.

The suggestion that the soil of Flanders is exceptionally fertile, or the climate exceptionally favourable, must be excluded, as de Laveleye has shown in his classical work, *Essai sur la population rurale de la Belgique.* "A soil," he wrote, " both sandy and wet, "containing no lime, and with a subsoil of ferrugineous tuff and "gravel, exposed in many places to inundations and swamping—"this was the land from which the Flemish population had to "obtain its food. Of the various soils cultivated by man few are "equally ungrateful." Its present fertility is entirely due to the work of many generations. The value which the Flemish population attach to the land, and in virtue of which they will not leave the smallest plot uncultivated, may be observed even before one leaves Ghent. Not a bit of temporarily vacant land on the outskirts of the town can be seen anywhere. Horticultural establishments, market gardens, and dairy farms begin to make their appearance before you have issued from the suburbs. And as soon as you have left behind you the last buildings, you are at once amidst a rural population. I have visited a number of these farms in the suburbs. The small and simple house, the courtyard, the cow sheds, the stables, and the pigsty, are so disposed as to spare every available foot for culture. In most cases dairy-farming is combined with market-gardening. It would not pay, the farmers say, to work the one without the other. By the side of every dairy farm there is, therefore, a market-garden, upon which the manure derived from the farm is utilised. And there are in most cases also a few glass houses, or at least a few frames for raising young plants and forcing early vegetables. All these farms look prosperous,



## III.

Serious farming begins with those who hold five to ten acres of land, and this class constitutes the true backbone of the agricultural population. What the speciality of this class of farmers is it would be difficult to say. They utilise the land in any productive manner, and they make money out of everything—butter, cheese, rabbits, poultry, green and root crops, vegetables, cereals, &c. The thousands of Ostend rabbits carried away by large steamers to England are all collected from such small farms one by one, and rarely more than half-a-dozen at a time. Honey, poultry, millions of eggs, exported every year, come in small quantities from the same little homesteads. It is interesting to note that this production on a small scale not only answers its purpose of growing considerable quantities of foodstuffs, but that it seems to be the best method all round. Large poultry farms, I was told, as well as the attempts to breed rabbits on a large scale, have repeatedly ended in failure, while the small farmers make a good income out of both. The rabbits seem to thrive best in small families. A dozen of them are usually kept in a corner of the yard, and are fed on all sorts of vegetable refuse. Two breeds a year are usually sold, a large fat rabbit fetching fifteen pence. The poultry, too, require no special attention when the hens can be allowed to run free, and little food is required in addition to what they find themselves. The new-laid eggs which my friends at Ghent had in the midst of winter came from a neighbouring farm, where they were obtained without more trouble than to let the hens roost in the dry shelter of the loft of the house. This is a widespread fashion, and it is quite usual to see at the side of the small farmhouse some simple contrivance which permits the hens to reach the loft and to roost therein. The variety of plants grown on these farms is astounding, for, besides the cereals, the green crops for fodder, and the root crops, quite a number of plants are cultivated

had been excavated to a certain depth and sold; and finally the mould had been replaced so as to make the field quite even. Only the lowest portions of the land are given to meadow, and no labour is spared in irrigating and manuring them, so as to obtain wonderful crops of hay.

Strict economy in land is the rule. Hedges are kept only along the main roads and the main ditches, and then they are only made of such bushes as give fuel wood. The plough is brought very close to the edge of the hedge, and the narrow slip that is left is cultivated, down to the very roots of the bushes, with the spade, and then clover will be sown upon that border, to bring up a few rabbits. Even the meagre vegetation along the roadsides is utilised; the shepherd every day takes his sheep along the country roads, as they always find something to nibble on the roadsides and on the borders of the ditches.

The Flemish villages contain but few families which have nothing to do with agriculture. They are truly agricultural villages, even though the holdings of each family are very small as a rule. Most of the staple food is still home-grown. It is the same with those half-farmers who hold so little land that they must work on the larger farms. They are generally very poor, but they still get their staple food from their little plots. The remainder will be got by the family carrying on in the winter some domestic industry. Numbers of such industries are giving work to the Flemish peasants. In the villages hundreds of thousands of *sabots* are made of the wood of the poplars, which are such favourite trees in the Flemish landscape. Wooden utensils, wicker furniture, baskets, ropes, and many other articles of general use are fabricated in the small village houses. In some of the cottages one finds knitting-machines and hand-looms, to say nothing of hand-made lace. Some of the finest lace sold in the high-class shops of Belgium is made in the dim light of a cottage window.



and although their occupiers may have to move at any time, they keep their little establishments in beautiful order. In most cases only two or three cows are kept, or even only one. Very often there is no horse, and in this case the cart with the milk and the vegetables is taken to town by two harnessed dogs, aided by the farmer. There are hundreds of such dairy-and-garden farmers in the immediate neighbourhood of Ghent, all working without the help of hired labour. Most of them succeed so well that, after a number of years, they either become the owners of the land, or remove further into the country in order to take larger farms.

I made the acquaintance of one of these farmers, who was described as wealthy. The farm was his own property. He kept five cows, one horse, and a good many pigs. The house and all the buildings were small, neat, and built close to one another, while 400 *vergees* (about one acre and a half), were kept under cultivation. Two cool greenhouses, each 130 feet long, were stocked from top to bottom with cauliflower plants, early peas, celery plants, &c., all in pots; while outdoors the well-manured beds were already prepared to receive, as soon as the great frosts would be over, the young plants of early vegetables, cauliflowers, carrots, peas, lettuce, and all sorts of greens and sweet herbs, of which the Belgians make their delicious soups. From these outdoor beds the early crops are usually taken in the first days of May, although the climate is colder than the climate of Kent. Perhaps there is a little more sunshine. The farmer's wife, a bright, intelligent woman who spoke good French, laughed when I suggested something to her about "the dead season " on the farm. Her husband, herself, her old mother, a young labourer, and the girl-servant had plenty of work all the year round, and in summer they had to take an additional help. Five people having plenty to do on a farm of less than one acre and a half, summer and winter alike, explains how they manage to get from this small area the staple food for themselves, their four or five cows, as many pigs, and the horse. In

reality they buy only bran and beetroot refuse from the sugar factories to feed their live stock. I was told that the cows yielded a daily average of at least 100 litres (88 quarts) of milk. They are milked three times a day, and the early morning's milk is taken to Ghent by the farmer's wife herself in the horse-cart. She has in the town a number of regular customers for milk, butter, and vegetables. The second and third milkings go to make butter, while the skimmed milk feeds the calves and the pigs. A few days before my visit they sold an eight-days' old calf for 32s. Every year they sell also pigs. "Our pigs are "well fed," the farmer's wife said, "and they always weigh at "least 200 kilos" (440 lbs.). The vegetables bring in about £60 a year.

## II.

The dairy-and-market-gardening farms do not extend, as a rule, more than two or three miles from town. Further on begins field agriculture and cattle rearing. Even these are, however, on a small scale, larger farms being found in Flanders only on heavy soil, upon which heavy ploughs have to be used, and a larger capital is consequently required. With light soil a farm of twenty acres is considered large; the average is from three to fifteen acres, while farms of one acre are not uncommon. One may judge of the small size of most holdings by the number and the size of the corn stacks on them. In the neighbourhood of Ghent I have rarely seen farms with three or four stacks; the immense majority had only one or two, and these were farms of from three to eight acres. But I saw also much smaller farms, having less than one acre of land, and in this case there would be only one tiny stack standing close to the cottage, while the emerald green with which nearly half of the farmer's land was covered—it was in January—told me that next year the family of this homestead would still have their own bread. There is no exaggeration in saying that in the neighbourhood of Ghent



the average size of the farms is not more than four to six acres each, which would give 100 to 150 farms to the square mile.

It was most interesting and instructive to walk in this part of the country. I went one morning to a neighbouring village. It was a market-day, in the deepest part of the winter, and yet what impressed me most was the intensity of life on the road. Those who have lived amongst the peasants will surely understand what such animation means. To see them returning from the market—some leading by a rope a milch cow, or a young bull, or a couple of pigs, others bringing with them new agricultural implements which rattled in their carts as they drove by, and yet others bringing various products of the town industries in their baskets—such a sight means that these people not only work on the land, but that they work for themselves. And when I saw a young husband and wife struggling with a frisky heifer, which they led by a rope, I knew at once that they must have a home of their own, and were not mere hired labourers who have nothing to look forward to. Horse-carts and dog-carts, cattle, and numbers of people marching with their huge baskets on their shoulders, were crowding on the road, and this activity of rural life on a market-day shows, better than anything else, that there is plenty of work and prosperity in the country.

In the country I found the same careful treatment of the land as in the suburbs of the city. Plough-land, which may be sown with rye or wheat, is what the Flemish peasant values most, and he spares no labour to render every square yard of his farm suitable for the plough. It is the constant preoccupation of the farmer to transform the lower meadow-land into plough-land. On the small farms one can see how in every slight depression of the fields there is a carefully deposited little heap of road-scrapings and other rubbish, maybe brought together little by little by the children, in order to fill it up and thus level the field. And, equally, every slight swelling of the ground is levelled down. I saw fields in which the upper layer of vegetable mould had been taken off; then the sand below