

The Origin of Farming

By G E FUSSELL

IT can confidently be asserted that the history a man writes depends upon the circumstances and constitution of the society he lives in. A society like this of modern times wherein the financial nexus is of the first importance necessarily deals in economic history, the history of getting and spending. As Ecclesiastes puts it (X.19), a feast is made for laughter and wine maketh merry but money answereth all things. In an earlier society the story of the warrior class, royalty and aristocracy, and that of the most important part of society was characterized, and partly still is, by consideration of the political elements to the exclusion of the majority, the workers, the producers, the traders, and such like.

The earliest of the writers on the history of farming were the eighteenth-century contributors to such publications as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and other similar productions; Edmund Rack in the publications of the Bath and West Society, 1788; an anonymous writer who contributed to the first number of the *Farmer's Magazine*, 6 Jan 1800, a new production from Edinburgh; the *London Encyclopaedia*, 1810; and the *New Royal Encyclopaedia* issued about 1820. And there were others! The range of these publications through time is some fifty years and since there is a rather remarkable agreement between them, though expressed in different words, the assumption may be made that what they published was, generally speaking, acceptable.

What was the basis of agreement? Christianity, if not practised, was the general profession of the western world though there were some singular varieties of this belief. All the same there was, and in some few places

still is, an acceptance of the historical pronouncements of the Pentateuch. They were implicit in the history of farming that was written for the several encyclopaedias published in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, few of which have survived until the present day with the notable exception of the *Britannica* and *Chambers*. But not to put too fine a point upon it: it is in these encyclopaedias that agricultural history, as such, was born. Possibly it is not the history that would be acceptable in this far too critical an age, but for all that these contributions were the birth pangs of a new approach to the history of mankind. What was it?

It was implicit belief in the Scriptures — an understood thing for centuries almost beyond counting; and coupled with this was the acceptance that 'The antiquity of this art is beyond that of all others; for we are informed by Scripture that Adam was sent from the Garden of Eden to *till the ground*, and this being the case he must certainly have known how to do so.'¹

This was a sentiment that was multiplied by several authors whether contributors to encyclopaedias or to separate and individual publications. The contributor to the *London Encyclopaedia* of 1810 who wrote the article on *Husbandry* regretted with some solemnity the lack of improvement in farming practice since Biblical times, and with a rather (or so it sounds) hypocritical tear in his eye. 'In a profession of such high antiquity it is wonderful that so little improvement has been made; particularly when we reflect that *man* was so early and impressively admonished that

¹*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol IX, 1797, art, 'Agriculture'.

this was the only truly permanent mode on which he was to depend for bread and the support of human life', citing 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread; thorns and thistles shall bring it forth to thee and thou shalt eat in the heat of the field . . .' Plenty has smiled around their dwellings — a rather optimistic pronouncement.²

Another early nineteenth-century contributor to encyclopaedic knowledge, writing upon the *History and progress of agriculture* used different words to say much the same. 'Agriculture,' he wrote, 'unquestionably has been practised to the remote ages of the world', a statement it is impossible to disagree with. 'As mankind advanced from a state of nature their necessities increased and invention made improvements upon spontaneous vegetation', which is an acceptable theory even today, though this writer has his doubts. 'The mode of culture used in the antediluvian world we must leave to the investigations of those who are resolved to say something on every subject, and rather than be silent fill up the chasm with idle conjecture',³ a sentiment which I heartily endorse!

These people and others who will be quoted had a substantial belief in their precepts and the code founded upon literature that for a couple of thousand years has been estimated as inspired. Somebody has written a modern book on *The Bible as history*. Our ancestors would not have needed such a book. They were sure it was!

Others than the encyclopaedists began at this time to discuss the subject. Prominent among these was Edmund Rack, the founder of the Bath and West of England Society. One of the early activities of the society was the publication of a series of 'Letters and Papers'. To these Rack contributed in 1788⁴ a long essay on the origin of farming. It

pretended to an encyclopaedic knowledge of the origin and progress of agriculture in different ages and nations. Rack was not troubled by any of the modern uncertainty. Belief in his day was established upon a sure foundation. The base was Holy Writ: next the classics and the legends about earlier times. Rack could write with authority because he had no doubt that what he wrote was true.

Nearly always there is a precursor to any credo, and this is as true of agricultural history as of any other subject or purpose. In England alone there had been some rather trivial observations on this subject by the writers of farming textbooks in addition to the more formal and exhaustive contributions to encyclopaedias. The learned and unlearned writers of farming textbooks, an occupation that expanded in the eighteenth century, often prefaced their works with a pseudo-history of their subject although this was always synoptic, and before all an acceptable essay founded, as Rack's work was, on biblical and classical quotation.

Although many of his ideas about the origin and history of farming are now thought to be illusory, he had no conception of the modern minimal significance, in the economic sense, of food production when prosperity appears to rest on the production of the inorganic and mechanical articles supplied with an included obsolescence. With some appearance of justice he believed that his views were shared by the ancients, which is not unlikely because his were derived from theirs. 'The earth', he said, 'was considered by the ancients as Mother of Plenty', an incontrovertible truth today as then. In his own time he knew that agriculture was 'the basis of our public wealth and the happiness of numberless individuals', which must be differently expressed today.

Few men can escape or even expand the mental habits and environment of the times in which they live — a ponderous truism. Rack was no exception to this general rule which binds us all. Reasonably enough he remarked

²London Encyclopaedia, 1810, art, 'Husbandry'.

³New Royal Encyclopaedia, c1820. 'History and progress of agriculture'.

⁴(Edmund Rack) 'An essay on the origin and progress of agriculture in different ages', *Letters & Papers on Agriculture*, Bath & West Soc, 2nd edn, II, 1788, pp 310-44.

that 'the art of tilling, cultivating and improving the earth, so as to render it fruitful, claims the precedency of all other arts in point of antiquity as well as dignity. It was man's original employment in the primeval age of happiness and peace', a situation in which man has never found himself though our ancestors believed in an age of gold. Here he neglects the age of food gathering, which indeed was not recognized at that time.

The evidence for these economic conditions was then the Bible, in the factual truth of which there was in his day and for long after no suspicion of doubt. It was the biblical character, the father of the human race, Adam, 'who instructed his children', for Cain became the first husbandman and Abel the first shepherd; but alas these favourable conditions for humanity were obliterated by the Flood, which washed out every vestige of human art from the earth. Humanity must make a new beginning, and in the intervening thousands of years had brought food production to its then state of perfection.

Rack, like most of his contemporaries, believed in the descent rather than the ascent of man. For him the Old Testament, with all its bloody murders, described a golden age, though a careful reading of these holy books shows that in those days no man could trust his neighbour. There was a certainty in the beliefs of Rack's day that must have been very supporting. He believed, a belief that has long been shared, that 'the Chaldeans who inhabited the country where agriculture had its birth [a credo still largely accepted] carried that useful art to a degree of excellence unknown in former times' — no very surprising event as men are continually improving their processes.

Men achieve popularity by subscribing to the currently held beliefs of their time. Rack was a conformist, profitably. He was also a widely read man in the terms of his day. When, in the succession of events he related, the Flood took place is not clear from Rack's narrative, but according to him it was the

descendants of Noah who settled in Europe and carried agriculture with them.

Rack was not alone in his beliefs, which were a generally acceptable record of probable or possible events, the series of which could not be doubted. This was emphasized by the writer of the introduction to the first number of a new *Farmer's Magazine* that was instituted in Scotland in the year 1800.⁵ The introduction was history, and was inclined to emphasize the then modern state of farming as a long progression from the primitive. Its true feeling can only be given by rather elaborate quotation.

Like others of these early writers this anonymous writer opened his exegesis with a protestation that 'Agriculture is of such antiquity as to be coeval with the first formation of society', which the archaeologists of today would doubt. 'Accordingly in the remotest ages and amongst every people of whom we have any authentic history we find the cultivation of the earth the principal employment of the inhabitants, and by all of them held in such veneration as to have its origin ascribed to some deity or other.' Egyptians, Osiris; Phoenicians, Dagon; Greeks, Bacchus; Chinese, Ho Fi. This writer made speculations about the changes men made in their habits as their modified environment required. Only a long quotation can illustrate what he thought, which was really rather different from earlier, and some subsequent, writers. His idea was that the thousands of years of hunting may have led to a shortage of animals (of the chase), which is rather unlikely. Consequently other forms of nutrient had to be sought. 'The different kinds of fruit and herbs would in all probability, be first had recourse to' as an addition to former resources. Again, 'they would soon perceive that both the milk and the flesh of animals were improved by good feed in winter', a magnificent improbability. This unlikely observation 'would naturally lead to cutting and preserving green herbage

⁵ *The Farmer's Magazine*, 6 Jan 1800, Introduction.

for the purpose', hence the origin of hay. 'The cultivation of grain and other crops now in use belongs to a more advanced state of society' in his opinion, 'and many ages must have elapsed before men who were destitute of any other helps than those derived from experience and observation could attain even an imperfect knowledge of Agriculture. The sacred writings inform us that Noah understood Husbandry; of course he taught it to his descendants and as it is one of those arts which, when known, the wants of man will for ever prevent from being lost we may naturally conclude that it has continued its course, with various progress, from that period to the present day', a remark that does credit to a penetrating intelligence. He was convinced that 'to the introduction of Agriculture we are indebted for that dignified place now held by man in the scale of created beings', a caustic comment upon the faith of our ancestors.

Some twenty-five years later another Scotsman, handicapped by several physical disabilities but of indomitable courage and inexhaustible industry, included in his *Encyclopaedia of Agriculture*, 1825, an elaborate series of essays on the 'History of agriculture among ancient and modern nations'. 'The origin of agriculture', wrote Loudon, 'has been sought by many philosophers in natural circumstances. Man in his rudest state they consider would first live on roots and fruit, afterwards hunting and fishing (thus reversing the theories of his slightly earlier compatriot), 'next to the pasturage of animals, and lastly to all of these he would add the raising of crops. Tillage or the cultivation of the soil for this purpose is supposed to have been first practised in imitation of the effects produced by the sand and mud left by the inundation of rivers. . . . This hypothesis seems supported by the traditions and natural circumstances of Egypt and some renowned men, Sir Isaac Newton and Benjamin Stillingfleet therefore considered corn was first cultivated on the banks of the Nile', irrefragable authorities as these two men then were.

But there was a limitation. 'Traditional history traces men back to the time of the deluge. After that catastrophe of which the greater part of the earth's surface bears evidence, man seems to have recovered himself in the central parts of Asia, and to have attained to eminence in arts and government on the alluvial plain of the Nile', when Greece, Carthage and some other places on the Mediterranean were colonized: but Loudon was forced to admit that in his day the history of agriculture amongst the nations of what may be called classical antiquity was involved in impenetrable obscurity. 'Very few facts,' he wrote 'are recorded previously to the time of the Romans.'

The subject was greatly expanded, verbally, but with little or no new results of any consequence by contributors to a new magazine, *The Plough* that was started in 1846. Four essays on the subject appeared in the two volumes issued in that year.⁶ The first two of these were written by the Professor of Agriculture at a school for teaching farming that had been set up at Hoddesdon, Herts. He was a voluminous contributor to the agricultural literature of his time; but alas his theory of the origin of the processes involved in the cultivation of crops was just as naïve as that of his predecessors. Like all voluminous writers, Donaldson was apt to repeat himself in separate and successive essays. 'No people have yet been discovered', he wrote, that did not possess some method of stirring the earth for the purpose of promoting a renovated and more vigorous vegetation, and tools and implements of some shape or form for the purpose of effecting the pulverisation they found necessary. . . . Materials are wanting from which to compile a contemporary history of the progress made in the art of cultivating the earth from the rude practice of the remotest antiquity or the most savage barbarians to the most perfect cultivation of the present day. Even the earliest stages of our own practice we are left almost wholly to conjecture.

⁶John Donaldson, 'A notice of agriculture ancient and modern', *The Plough. A journal of agricultural affairs*, Jan-June, 1846; 'Aratorium or cultivation of lands'; *ibid*; Anon, 'On the philosophy of agriculture', *ibid*; Anon, 'The history of agriculture and agricultural associations', *ibid* July-Dec 1846.

But he had the odd and unlikely idea that 'It is very consistent with reason and quite consonant with analogy [an unlikely basis for history!] to suppose that the cultivation of the earth originated in observations of the better growth of vegetation on land that was stirred and pulverised'; and some other remarks suggest he was, perhaps not consciously, a man with slightly Darwinian ideas, but he had what are now thought of as erroneous thoughts because he believed that no people had yet been discovered that were totally ignorant of the simple art, which modern archaeologists would be loth to accept. He thought the practice of cultivating the earth in some way or other might be considered as coeval with the existence of man: a highly dubious pronouncement, but he went on once more in a then very orthodox way. Only quotation can justify this!

In the Eastern countries where Scripture and tradition place the first appearance of man, and where the arts and sciences were first cradled into existence and brought into use, we find that agriculture formed a primary object of attention in order to support that dense population of those fertile regions [but also] of the rural economy even of the most civilized nations of antiquity we are almost wholly ignorant.

Little was written about farming, but much about battles and sieges, havoc and murder, which unfortunately, he wrote, occupied the attention of the human race and formed the subject of record with historians. . . . 'From the age of Moses almost down to the commencement of the Christian era, though something may be gleaned of incidental notions in the Scriptures' there is nothing very explicit.⁷ What is explicit is that inevitably there must be a great deal of repetition in this essay if only because the Victorian writers themselves engaged in demonstrating clearly the persistence of ideas at least 2000 years old.

'Man is an omnivorous animal,' wrote the anonymous author of the essay *On the philosophy of agriculture*, 'his masticatory and digestive organs have been so constructed by

the Almighty that he is supported by a compound nutriment of animal and vegetable diet', the result being that he had to practice farming. 'In fact,' he said confidentially, 'Holy Writ informs us that agriculture is the most ancient science in existence for Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground.' This is a very pious writer, naïvely delightful, but he thought the theory of farming had been strangely neglected. It could be enquired whether theory is necessary when practice produces the goods?

The final contributor to the periodical, at least on this subject, succeeded in producing only the first chapter of his project: but he was a man without doubts. 'Agriculture is indisputably the most ancient of all the arts and sciences. Its history is coeval with the history of man; for no sooner was the mighty work of creation completed than Adam was placed in the garden of Eden to dress and keep it. (Gen.II.15).'

This man had the accepted canon well in mind. The Flood formed a boundary between the ancient wisdom and the new, an idea that was often propounded by the nineteenth-century writers of farming history; but nobody knew how the antediluvians farmed, although the amazing length of their lives must have given them opportunities of development denied to we pygmies of a briefer span. Doubtless the Deluge washed out, in a more than figurative sense, the wisdom of these learned ancients such as Methuselah. But Noah and his sons came to the rescue. 'Within two years after that event we read that "Noah began to be an husbandman and planted a vineyard" (Gen.IX.20).'

He had a nice sense of priorities! This learned writer was aware of the legendary history that revealed the origins of farming. After 2247 BC farming was chiefly practised in the east by the Chaldeans, and after 1804 BC the prophet Isaac found a refuge from famine in Phoenicia. The Egyptians were fortunate in their farming. The Israelites after their settlement in Palestine, 1450 BC, began farming. Both India and Persia are celebrated

⁷Eg, Isaiah, XVIII, 24-8: 1 Kings XIX, 19-21.

for the respect they paid to agriculture. In India Bacchus planted a vineyard, a commendable process and an indication of priorities. Ceres was worshipped as a goddess in Sicily. He then proceeds to Mago the Carthaginian and other conventional documentation; but he failed to continue his history after the first instalment.

There is a degree of orthodoxy about all this that was characteristic of so much Victorian thought, and indeed of all thought, because it is largely the result of consultation with the accepted and traditional way of thinking. John Sherer put it rather differently from most of these writers.⁸ 'The cultivation of a garden was the only occupation of our first parents in Paradise: and from that hour to this it has been considered even by those whose position is such as to have placed one within reach of their power, to be the purest of human employments', an unexceptionable sentiment.

John Chalmers Morton, a prolific writer in the mid-nineteenth century, was rather more of a cynic.⁹ 'We are familiar in almost every treatise on the art', he wrote, 'with an opening announcement of its antiquity and of its importance to mankind. . . .' But the antiquity of an art was in his opinion no measure of criterion of its advancement. The assertions of primeval origin conveyed little more significance to the mind that if made of the earth itself — a piece of pleasing contempt. To this production C Wren Hoskyns contributed the history and general philosophy of the subject. He had already written a separate work about it, which was surprisingly enough quite in the orthodox vein of the epoch.

At this point of time John Donaldson made a further contribution, possibly in an attempt to consolidate his reputation — which it certainly did.¹⁰ He, like others, proceeded

along the road from prehistory, a word he would probably have not recognized, to his own day. The book was intended to be technical instruction, or so it seems to the modern reader: but the writer, like his contemporaries, must deal with origins. 'History,' he wrote accurately enough for his day, 'affords little or no information on the subject of the performance of an art which is the very first in value and consequence to the human race.' Indeed without it the people perish! 'Nations are very considerably advanced in civilization before they made written records of any kind and they have progressed much further before any mention is made of agriculture. . . . The early historians . . . contributed with the bare relation of the facts', but nothing about causes — a contention to which it is possible to subscribe without reservation.

Donaldson's ideas had not changed since he began to write. He believed in what is now perhaps the accepted canon, of food gathering and the cultivation of grains which were in use before the commencement of history. There are, as he recognized, incidental notices in Holy Writ, but nothing that illuminates the methods of farming and food production. To his mind the agriculture of the ancients so far as it could then be known, was described in Dickson's book called *The Agriculture of the Ancients*, a production published in two volumes in 1788, which is in some sort correct, subject to certain reservations — Dickson's ancients being mainly the classical writers.

Samuel Copland, who wrote a massive two-volume work in 1866,¹¹ had nothing to add to the conjectures of his predecessors. Lengthy quotation is the only way to give full scope of his ideas, though these are little different except verbally from those of the previous writers already presented here.

We have no knowledge of the mode of cultivation employed in the earliest ages of mankind having only the simple announcement in the oldest record extant

⁸John Sherer, *Rural Life described and illustrated*, nd (c1850), p xiv.

⁹John Chalmers Morton, *A Cyclopaedia of Agriculture*, 1855, I, Preface & Introduction.

¹⁰John Donaldson, *British Agriculture*, 1860.

¹¹An Old Norfolk Farmer, *Agriculture . . . ancient and modern*, 1866, I, p 98.

that Abel was a keeper of sheep, and that Cain was a tiller of the ground . . . there is no doubt but that the practice of agriculture was the first and foremost industry of man and we may assume that the knowledge of its principles were imparted to him in one way or another by the same Power that endowed him with understanding and skill.

After the Deluge, of course, Noah became an husbandman and planted a vineyard. This is once again an inevitable example of the fact that historians repeated each other.

All this was stated once more by Judge Hastings Ingham in 1887.¹² He was extremely well read in the Scriptures, and believed that some 6000 years was the world's age. 'Agriculture,' he said, 'was the first occupation of the first human being who trod this earth.' The Cain and Abel legend was the

¹²Judge Hastings Ingham, *Agriculture; its history, importance and prospects*, 1887.

firm basis of his theories, but he acknowledged that the history of farming was nebulous because the tale of history had dwelt upon the broils, and not upon the toils, of the human family. 'The history of agriculture is the history of civilization and progress in the very earliest times. In following the track of the ploughshare we shall have the satisfaction of tracing the rise of human industry from its very origin . . . ' — not very profound, but precise as might be expected from a judge.

After this time the English and Scottish writers who employed their energy in writing the history of farming confined themselves to their native land, and did not venture into the hazy realms of origins other than those of their own country. These and others have been dealt with elsewhere, and are too numerous to be included in a restricted study.

New Guinea Gardens

A Study of Husbandry with Parallels in Prehistoric Europe

Axel Steensberg

1980, xxvi + 224pp., £10.80 (UK only) / \$25.00, 0.12.664940.5

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