Title: Continental Farming and Peasantry

Author: Howard James

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CONTINENTAL FARMING

AND

PEASANTRY.

BY

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PREFACE.

In November last, I read a Paper on the Farming and Peasantry of the Continent at the Farmers' Club, London. A day or two afterwards, The Times published a leading article on the subject; subsequently, other newspapers and periodicals criticized the views I had advanced.

Owing to such prominent notice, I had a great number of applications for copies of my Paper, and was urged to publish it. Upon the assembling of Parliament, so many Members of the House expressed a similar wish, that I have at length yielded to the request so frequently made to me.

In addition to the Paper read at the Farmers' Club, I have given an Appendix, containing answers to a number of questions which I put to persons of experience in the rural affairs of their own countries.

Opinions have been expressed, that my strictures on petite culture and on the farming of Belgium were too severe, and that I had looked upon things too much from an English stand-point. I have therefore given copious extracts, from a Report on the subject, just published by
the Royal Agricultural Society of England, which corroborate the views I had previously expressed.

The Report is the joint production of Professor Augustus Voelcker and Mr. Jenkins, F.G.S., Editor of the Royal Agricultural Journal. These gentlemen went over to Belgium last autumn, as a deputation from the Council of the Royal Agricultural Society of England; the Society being desirous of obtaining the fullest and most reliable information upon the agriculture of that country. I would recommend all who feel an interest in the subject, to refer to the current number of the Royal Agricultural Journal, published by J. Murray, Albemarle Street, London.

JAMES HOWARD.

*Bedford, March 1, 1870.*
CONTINENTAL

FARMING AND PEASANTRY.

A few days ago, as I was reading Dr. Norman McLeod's account of his recent journey, entitled "Peeps at the far East," the thought occurred to me that the title of the paper I am about to bring before the Club should have been "Peeps at Continental Farming;" for, within the space usually devoted to any question discussed in this room, it would be impossible to traverse the whole field embraced by my subject. I believe we have arrived in this country at a position when, as a nation, we are proud of our agriculture, proud of the rapid progress made in the cultivation of the soil, proud of the perfection to which our live stock has been brought, proud, may I say, of our mechanical achievements in farm operations, proud, as the Chairman has remarked, of having been able to compete with the whole world; further, we are proud that other departments of industry and other nations have come to recognize the scientific status British agriculture has attained. I confess that I share in this pride; actuated by this feeling, and believing that, in the art of farming, England upon the whole is in advance of every other nation, the conclusion is naturally arrived at that we have little to learn from other countries. For years I travelled backward and forward to France impressed with the notion that the only lesson we could learn from the farmers across the Channel was the one to be learned from some of our enthusiastic amateur friends at home, viz., practices to be avoided. During the first International Exhibition at Paris (1855) I had occasion to visit some large French farms, which I found thoroughly well-managed; my insular pre-
judices from that time gave way. From time to time since that period, particularly during the International Exhibition of 1867, other farms, both large and small, in different parts of France have come under my observation. On my return to England, after the close of the Paris Exhibition, I addressed the following letter to the President of the Royal Agricultural Society of England:

"My Lord Duke,—I desire to draw the attention of the Council to the important question of growing sugar-beet in England. During the Paris Exhibition I made several excursions into the country with a view to see some of the most celebrated farms; at each I found a large portion of the land devoted to the growth of this root. Upon inquiry I learned that the profit on the crop was far greater than upon any crop grown in England. I have been assured by agriculturists from various parts of Europe who have visited me, that they see nothing in our soil or climate to prevent the growing of sugar-beet of excellent quality. As it is a question of national importance, I venture to suggest that the Council should send a small deputation to the Continent, to obtain reliable information upon the subject, and upon the best mode of making sugar from the beet. M. Decombeque, of Lens, in the north; M. Dailly, of Trappes, near Versailles; Baron Rothchilds, of Ferrières, near Paris; M. Cail, at La Bruche, near Tours, have very complete sugar factories and fine large farms; the last named has nearly 4,000 acres. I believe a well-selected deputation to visit the best farms on the Continent would bring home a vast deal of information on many subjects beyond the particular one in question, which would prove advantageous to British agriculture.

"To His Grace the Duke of Richmond."

In reply, I received the usual official acknowledgment from the Secretary, Mr. Hall Dare; but, as no mention was made of the subject in the succinct report which usually appears after each monthly meeting of the Council, I am to this day in ignorance whether the subject ever came before the members or not. Believing that some account of Continental agriculture would be interesting if not advantageous to the English farmer, I determined, at the time I have named, to bring the subject before this Club. Last year I was prevented from carrying out my intention, but this autumn I determined upon a tour on the Continent. The object I had in view was to note down facts upon any topic that might come under my observation, and more particularly to acquire information upon the subject alluded to in my letter to the President of the Royal Agricultural Society of England. Wherever I went on
my tour I was received with cordial welcome; information was readily given, and, what was very gratifying, England was always referred to with the greatest respect and the most kindly feeling. If tourists on the Continent, who know anything of farming, would strike off into the rural districts, leave for a time the usual sight-seeing of cathedrals, picture galleries, &c., I believe they would find travelling far less monotonous, and return home not only with more information but with many more pleasant reminiscences of their trip. I have obtained a good deal of information from persons in various parts of Europe upon the condition of agriculture in their localities. I purpose giving some of the statistical and other facts in an Appendix to my paper, as I think the information is worthy of being placed on record for those who may feel an interest in the inquiry.

FRENCH FARMING.

I would first invite attention to the agriculture of France. French agriculture has long had what many have advocated for England, viz., a Government Department of Agriculture, presided over by a Minister, who takes under his paternal care the whole family of French agriculturists. The collection of statistics, agricultural colleges, veterinary colleges, experimental farms, mechanical museums, schools, roads, drainage, horse-breeding, chemistry, the necessary supply of food for the people, an experimental implement factory, and a hundred other things are under his control, and the expenses of these various institutions and plans are defrayed by the State.

Again, the State establishes horse shows and agricultural meetings. The whole country has been divided into twelve districts, in each of which a show, termed a “Concours Regional” is held, and large sums are distributed with a view to stimulate improvements in the various departments of farming. At these shows everything is under the control of an Inspector-General of Agriculture, the whole expense being borne by the State. Further, the French Government, with a view to raise the general standard of farming, offers in each of the districts £200 and a silver cup worth another £120, called the “Pre-
mium of Honour," as a prize for the best managed farm on which the most useful improvements have been introduced. With all these various agencies in full force one might expect that agriculture throughout France would be stripped of everything primitive, and that the motto of the new French Agricultural Society "Practice with Science, Progress with Prudence" would be everywhere realized.

If an intelligent English agriculturist were to form his estimate of French farming by what he could see from the railway between Calais and Paris, he would, from the small number of cattle and sheep and other indications, come to the conclusion that the whole country was going to the bad. This however is not the case; improvement is very slow, scarcely perceptible, except to those who make an inspection at long intervals. In England it was many years before such farms as the Earl of Leicester's in Norfolk, the Duke of Bedford's at Woburn, and Earl Spencer's in Northamptonshire exerted any marked influence on farms throughout this country. So in France, there are, scattered up and down, farms which are as far in advance of the general agriculture of the country as were the farms of these spirited noblemen at the beginning of the present century. The farms I have alluded to have many of them received the "premium of honour," and are exerting a quiet but powerful influence in their respective neighbourhoods. Notably among such farms is that of M. Decrombecque, at Lens, about 130 miles from Paris. M. Decrombecque is a very remarkable man; although upwards of 70 years of age he is full of energy; is well read in agriculture, and knows England: he is familiar too with English methods of farming, of which he has not been slow to avail himself. His farm is 1,200 acres in extent. Half the land is his own, purchased out of profits made by farming, and I ought perhaps to add, supplemented by sugar making; indeed, he told me he had very little capital when he commenced 46 years ago. On the occasion of my visit in the harvest of 1867, his wheat crop was very fine. I saw also 500 acres of beet-root, all on the ridge, without a single blank spot in any part; he estimated that the produce would weigh about 18 tons per acre. The land had all