

Reconstruction  
by Way of the Soil

*Sample*

*Sample*

RECONSTRUCTION  
BY WAY OF THE SOIL

Guy Theodore Wrench

A DISTANT MIRROR

*Sample*

RECONSTRUCTION BY WAY OF THE SOIL  
by Guy Wrench

Originally published in 1946.

This edition copyright ©2017 A Distant Mirror

ISBN 9780648859413

All rights to this edition of this work are reserved.

A DISTANT MIRROR  
*web* [adistantmirror.com.au](http://adistantmirror.com.au)  
*email* [admin@adistantmirror.com.au](mailto:admin@adistantmirror.com.au)

*Sample*

# Contents

1. Introduction 7
2. Rome 22
3. The Roman Foods 35
4. The Roman Family 45
5. Soil Erosion in ancient Rome 51
6. Farmers and Nomads 55
  - The Land*
  - The Nomads*
  - The Farmers*
  - Nomadic Migrations and Farmers*
7. Contrasting Pictures 76
8. Banks for the Soil 85
9. The Economics of the Soil 93
10. The English Peasant 108
11. Primitive Farmers 129
12. Nyasa 144
13. Tanganyika 150
14. Humanity and the Earth 154
15. Sind and Egypt 164
16. Fragmentation 177
17. The East and West Indies 194
18. The German Colonies: The Mandates 211
19. Russia, South Africa, Australia 223
  - Russia*
  - South Africa*
  - Australia*
20. The United States of America 235
21. A Kingdom of Agricultural Art in Europe 254
22. An Historical Reconstruction 274
  - The Initiation*
  - The Institution*
  - The Achievement*
23. Summary 300
24. A Plan for Action 311

Sample

## Acknowledgements

IN THE CONSTRUCTION of this book, I am indebted to many living authors, whose words I have quoted in my text.

Amongst them, I feel I owe a special tribute to Mrs Elspeth Huxley for the use I have made of her book *The Red Strangers*. I have immeasurable admiration for her exquisite story.

In my faith in the primary value of the soil I have been greatly strengthened by the books of two honoured friends, the Earl of Portsmouth's *Alternative to Death* and Lord Northbourne's *Look to the Land*.

The Earl's book, published in 1943, has only recently reached me. With a general outlook closely similar to my own, the author has something which I do not possess; namely, an intimate, personal knowledge of all that pertains to the soil of Britain. His book constitutes the comprehensive guide for which all workers determined to build a sane, earth-based foundation for our national life have been looking.

Lord Northbourne's book was published in 1940, and it has been my frequent companion in the three years which I have taken in the writing of this book. Lord Northbourne has also helped me in ways surpassing the usual kindness of friendship. He has taken full charge of the typescript of the book in England, and, by a careful study of the text, has assisted me with most valuable criticisms.

Lastly, I wish to thank my friend, Dr Haji Kassim, for his great help in the compilation of the 21st and 22nd chapters.

~ Dr Guy Theodore Wrench

# Sample

# Introduction

IT WILL BE CLEAR to a reader, who, like a prospector confronting a face of rock, runs his eye down the page of contents of this book, that its subject is a general one. It is, indeed, widespread both in space and time, yet in spite of its generality it cannot be said to be widely recognized; so little so, in fact, that to many readers it will appear a new subject.

People, under the advanced differentiation of the present day, are apt to think of themselves as finished products – as soldiers, merchants, sailors, engineers, lawyers and so on – but to speculate on what they, one and all, actually *are*, seldom occupies many of them for more than a few casual moments.

Nevertheless, now that they are involved in a supreme crisis (*the author is referring to WW2 – ed.*), now that, however complete victory may be, the future cannot be the replica of the past, it is inconceivable that humanity will not be forced to face fundamental questions such as in previous times of habit and routine they were able to avoid.

They have already come to learn that this age, so distinguished for its scientific progress and its widespread knowledge has, in spite of these advantages, *completely failed in its promise of peace and prosperity.*

Even in such vital social problems as feeding and employment, it has failed, and failed signally. Those who have now been forced to experience in their own lives, and therefore to reflect upon, these two problems,

Sample

are astounded that their resolution has been so definitely brought about by war. Where peace failed, it seems that war has succeeded brilliantly.

The will of the people and the skill of organization have assured all of their share of the national food supply. Those who do hard manual labour can rely on receiving sufficient to allow them to accomplish their work without the weariness that results from partial starvation.

Why is war so much more effective in these respects than peace? What is lacking in times of peace that comes into being in times of war?

Is it that under the supreme strain of war against a powerful and ruthless enemy there arises in the homeland a peace, goodwill, and sense of brotherhood which displaces the greedy competition, the covert hostility and the social barriers of peacetime that destroy the best qualities of country, blood and language? Does our civilization need war to make decency of human conduct prevail?

Many answers have been given to these and kindred questions, but in order to look at them afresh, it is proposed in this book to review conditions, both historical and immediate, with a vision untarnished by the pride of the present, pride attached to that in which one's ego has its being. This is a broad statement, for all are tarred with the same brush, and no one can claim impartiality exempting him from his heritage and the prejudice of circumstance. Yet, if we are to enjoy a better communal and individual life after the war than before it, the attempt has to be made with the probity it demands.

To introduce the attempt is the object of this opening chapter, and to make this beginning we will try to look at people not as final products, not as labourers, merchants, shopmen and the rest, not as rich and poor, sick and healthy, wise and foolish, but as they are – all and each

*Sample*  
8

inseparably linked together in a common likeness, one which will pervade the chapters of this book.

This common likeness is the fact that we are all supporting our lives with the products of the soil. Like other forms of life, vegetable and animal, we humans are dependent for our existence upon the crust of the earth on which we live.

Humanity, however, possess a marked peculiarity which distinguishes us from other forms of earthly life. It is this – that we alone have been able to make ourselves *partners* in the creative power of the soil. We alone are agriculturists or farmers, whereby we assure ourselves a constant supply of food, clothing and other primal necessities instead of having to trust in the uncertainties of chance.

Mankind alone has acquired a degree of mastery over the earth. In this ability to take part in the creation of their necessities, humanity has gained something more than a mere increase in its food supply. We have gained an understanding, dim though it may be, of the relationship between ourselves and the powers which rule the universe and that minute part of it on which we live. Humans have realized that to be partners in creation, they have to submit themselves to the unavoidable autocracy of these powers; they have to be, in their own language, creatures of the Creator, and as such, however headstrong and dominant they may be over weaker forms of life than theirs, they are, nevertheless, like them limited by the laws of their existence.

Upon the basis of limitation, humans are inevitably compelled to shape their individual and social lives. Should they transgress, they or their descendants are inevitably punished. These rules and restrictions under which mankind lives are those of the very nature of life and death.

Sample

Life and death are the two essential conditions of earthly existence; they are the two different phases of this existence.

The living may cease to be alive, but it is not lost to the cycle of existence, and remains within it as a necessary part of it.

In the condition which is called 'dead', matter is either in the soil or will eventually reach it. That which, by its life, has had the power to lift itself from the crust of the earth now returns to that crust. There it plays an essential part in promoting further life. In a word, there is no actual death as a permanent thing. There is only a suspension of life. Death itself is but a phase of life in which dead matter returns to the soil, where it is reformed into living matter again.

*There is nothing that has once taken life from the soil, that will not, by reaching the soil, again become living.* The dead leaf that we see lying on the path at our feet is not dead in the sense of being finished. Let it lie, and, through the creative agency of the soil, its substance will again enter into a blade of grass, a flower, an insect, bird or animal, and so return to the kingdom of the living.

Life and death are therefore not separate entities, but phases of each other. The living has to respect the dead as a part of itself, not ultimately dead but living. This respect has been expressed in the religious life of humanity by various forms of reverence in which the innate eternity of life in its most highly developed form, that of the human soul, is recognized.

When humans do not interfere and the soil is left to itself, it does not fail. Through it everything that has passed from a state of life is restored again to a state of life; nothing is lost.

In the philosophy of modern science, however, the seeds that lie scattered upon the ground and do not fructify are

Sample

stigmatized as failures, while those that grow into plants are dubbed the fittest, because they survive and expand into plants. Yet the other seeds survive no less; they re-enter cycles of life by other paths. Some even enter the very plants to which their fellow seeds have given rise. So, for example, every one of the countless seeds of the elm that litter the ground in early summer and which fail to turn into trees are not failures in the symphony of nature. In a musical symphony, each note, even the lowest and lowliest, *fits*. It is not a question of the fittest excluding or making superfluous the remainder. That is a wholly false outlook upon the processes of earthly life. Each has its place without which the whole is incomplete. Each has its place in a creative cycle, each passes from soil to plant and then, in many cases, to animal, and, after an interlude of death, returns to the creative realm of soil.

This is the symphony of nature and creation to which humans as creatures of the earth are inevitably bound and yet not wholly bound. Though they themselves are products of the soil, yet through the possession of their intellect, they have become *co-creators* and, within their limited human sphere, fashioned in the image of the Creator.

They can produce life other than their own. To do this in accord with the processes of creation, they must themselves be continuous and limited in production; they must act in harmony with the process, as it exists on earth apart from them.

Here they have to *fit*; they have to act within a process of balance. In it the living as a whole are balanced by the dead as a whole. In the living itself, its chief forms, vegetable and animal, balance each other. They are interdependent, and are incomplete without each other.

In the exchange of vegetable and animal life with the enveloping atmosphere, a similar balance is effected. It has

Sample

to be regarded as a whole of balanced parts and therefore is, in human phraseology, of the character of art. Nothing in it is isolated, everything belongs to the pattern. From this art of fitting within the whole, certain consequences necessarily follow.

Wholeness or health – two words of a like origin and meaning – are one consequence.

\*

This wholeness as a consequence has to be proved. Though it seems logical enough, yet little has been done to prove it in an age of unprecedented speed and discovery, an age of immense progress at a constantly expanding periphery, which by distance has inured man to the earth itself.

We are today no longer whole or healthy, physically or mentally. In the careful work of the Peckham investigators, it has been established that the vast majority of us are subnormal. We have broken away from the great primary fact of our existence – that we are first and foremost *earthly animals*, and, until we regain that fact and put it into practice, we cannot expect our social and individual lives to be whole.

Our civilization, threatened with destruction as we know it to be, has to be *healed* – another word meaning *whole* – and to be healed it has to be overhauled and *reconstructed in its relation to the soil that provides it with the means of existence.*

This was the task the bare outline of which presented itself to the author when, as a medical student, I was appalled by the crowded state of the outpatient department of a large London hospital.

'*Why disease? What then is health?*' were the questions that often vexed me. To answer them I had neither the opportunity, nor the tenacity which truly great men have

Sample  
12

in pursuing an object that is to them a consuming passion and for which they will forgo the pleasures of life, and which end so often in destitution and despair.

For that heroic life I lacked the courage, but the questions did not entirely leave me. It was only when I had leisure in which to retire for a space of years (brought to an end by the war) that I was able to gather material for the answer to this fundamental question regarding correct earthly being:

*'Is there a relation of humanity to the soil  
which assures our health?'*

The answer came as a decided yes, and in the instances I was able to gather, I found that humans could acquire health if they gave to the soil on which they lived all the food and water it required, and if they did not weaken it by exceeding the limits of the creative powers which nature had allotted to it.

My chief lesson I gained from a little-known people called the Hunza, to whom I was attracted by what Sir Robert McCarrison, who knew them well, wrote of them:

*'They are long lived, vigorous in youth and age, capable of great endurance and enjoy a remarkable freedom from disease in general.'*

He found that the Hunza, isolated in their mountain valley amidst the vast mountains of the Karakoram in north-west India, gave close attention to the soil, which strangely enough, seemingly related them to a golden age of agriculture. As a strengthening of this supposition, he found that their present farming recalled to that most cultured of mountaineers, the late Lord Conway, the unsurpassed farming of pre-Spanish Peru, the remnants of which he had seen, and which caused another explorer, O. F. Cook of the Bureau of Plant Industry of the USA

Sample  
13

Department of Agriculture, to state:

‘Agriculture is not a lost art, but must be reckoned as one of those which reached a remarkable development in the remote past and afterwards declined.’

The glowing pages of Prescott’s second chapter in the *Conquest of Peru* seem to shine again with the Hunza, huddled between the highest congress of great mountains on earth.

Cook found that the Hunza meticulously preserved the rule of return. They were, indeed, the source of my understanding of the ultimate nature of the soil and man, and of the relationship between life and death, to which I referred a few pages back. Nothing that once got life from the Hunzas’ soil was ever wasted; everything, from the least fleck of wool, the fallen leaf, the broken nutshell, to human refuse itself, was gathered and after suitable preparation returned to the soil for its food.

The Hunzas paid the same heed to water, which, by means of their principal aqueduct, the Berber – itself famous in its own right – they brought along with its silt from a glacier snout to their terraced fields. Of the Berber, Lord Conway wrote:

‘The Alps contain no *Wasserleitung* which for volume and boldness of position can be compared to the Hunza canal. It is a wonderful work for such a toolless people as the Hunza to have accomplished, and it must have been done many centuries ago and maintained ever since, for it is the life-blood of the valley.’

Here, too, they were like the people of Peru, of whose waterways, stretching for hundreds of miles across the slopes and precipices of mountains, Prescott wrote:

Sample

‘That they should have accomplished these difficult works with such tools as they possessed is truly wonderful.’

The words ‘many centuries ago’ led me to further inquiries. I found that Professor N. I. Vavilov, of the Institute of Applied Botany, Leningrad, had discovered that the area of which the Hunza Valley forms a part

‘is one of the most important and primary world agricultural centres, where the diversity of a whole series of plants have originated’.

The people of ancient Peru, according to Cook, also produced a wonderful series of plants in the secluded valleys of the Andes and so made them the most important originating agricultural centre in America.

Here, then, within the precincts of British-supervised India, was a people who brought quite a marvellous message from the remote past, a past that justifies the tradition of the Golden Age – a past of perfect relations between humanity and the soil.

The Hunzas had created a symphony of nature. As each note, however humble, has its proper place in a symphony of Beethoven, so even the humblest fallen leaf and each drop of water have their place in the symphony of Hunza. I learned from the Hunza that their work too, was art in its original sense – derived from *aro*, to ‘fit’.

I learnt that farming is an art, and something infinitely more than just scientific agriculture. *It is a way of life itself.*

So much for the health and constantly cheerful wholeness which the Hunza enjoy. There are many other examples of this health still extant on the globe, all of them in places remote from our Western civilization. To those who are interested in this – at present – novel meaning of genuine health, I commend my book *The Wheel of Health*, in which these examples are recorded in detail. It is an

Sample

essential subject to understand for any who feel the need for a reconstruction by way of the soil.

Nevertheless, it must be said that such small and remote examples are scarcely likely to have much effect on those upon whom this reconstruction by way of the soil is now urged. It seems that one is destined to stir one's readers with the negative proof of the devastation and sickness that the modern era has brought to the soil and its products, rather than by isolated proofs of wholeness, health, cheerfulness and wellbeing.

Before, however, entering upon the long path of negative proof, there presents itself a second positive element of construction, which is complementary to the meticulous care of the soil. This is the *form* in which that meticulous care of the soil is undertaken. The form is that of *family farming*.

### **Family farming**

The family as a group is but a human complement of the soil itself, both family and soil recreating life. The family is human continuity, and the soil is vital continuity. Continuity of the family necessitates marriage as the mode of the bond of the woman to the soil; marriage bringing sons and daughters to the service of the land. It is the land that gave its particular meaning to the farming family; it is its creative power that united itself with the creation of the farmers' children. Marriage, the bearing of children, the apprenticeship of children, the respect of children for their parents and their ancestors, the care that is bestowed by the elders on the present generation because it is to repeat itself in future generations – all this wholeness of life finds its true significance in continuous family ownership or inherited right to the land.

It is, then, the land as family property, or in lesser and

*Sample*

more dependent degree, craft as family property, requiring the work of the family for their continuity, which primarily gives stability to men and women, making a *people*.

This right the people of ancient Peru possessed. Their self-governing communities or *ayullus*, settled in ownership of limited areas of land, existed from remote antiquity. They were the basis of the autocratic state, and they themselves constituted an agrarian communism collectively holding the land. The uniting of the *ayullus* was effected by the rulership of the principal *ayullu*, or royal family.

By far the majority, too, of the Hunza families – and the Hunza are also an ancient people – are freeholders, subject in their unity to the rulership of the *Mir*.

The greatest example of family farming is to be found among the Chinese. Their empire is by far the most stable and continuous in the world's history, and it was originally founded in the long distant past upon family property, or right to the land.

It was to their revered sages that the Chinese have always attributed their *Tsing Tien* system, the system of the nine fields. A square of land was divided by drawing two lines across it from side to side and two up and down, as in the nursery game of noughts and crosses. Nine squares were thereby formed, eight outer and one central square. The eight outer squares of land were allotted to eight families, while the centre square was worked co-operatively and its produce given to the government officials as a tax in kind.

This division into nine squares was symbolic of the principles of the sages. Where it could be, it was no doubt carried out, but it was not rigid. The soil is not so uniform in character that it can be divided with such exactness. One square might be less readily cultivated than another; one family might be larger than another. So adjustments

Sample  
17

were made; for example, if one family had several sons and another none, one or more sons of the first might be adopted by the second family.

Adaptations were made, but the principal and standard measurements remained. It was considered by the sages as the principle of choice because it promoted co-operation, close social relations, mutual production, easy exchange of commodities, unified customs, saving of individual expenses, and it connected the work and life of the families to the nation as a whole through the work which the combined families undertook on the central field. This central field could also be adjusted within limits; it could be enlarged or diminished according to the general fortune of the province or nation.

The nine squares within a square symbolized a simple approach to life, which without doubt produced a stability now inconceivable to our Western minds trained in its opposites – in change, progress and instability. We have become accustomed to regarding stability as stagnation. However, since we have become confused and disillusioned with progress and the disasters which it has brought and with which it further threatens almost all mankind, we have come to think of traditional methods with more interest and approval, but nevertheless as something still distant and foreign to us.

Yet if nature is limited, and humanity cannot pass certain boundaries or exceed certain controls without bringing upon itself generations of disaster or even human extinction, then some such stable system as that of the Chinese takes upon itself a very different aspect in the measure of human wisdom.

It may be that it will then appear as a natural human system, in scale and endurance the greatest achievement in the partnership of intelligent man and nature upon

*Sample*

the earth. It was such a system that long ago attained a certain finality, a completion such as a great art work, a great cathedral or temple reaches. The building needs care, love and daily attendance and sometimes renovation, but it cannot be made more beautiful. It reaches its excellence and, though time may make it more revered and loved, its very excellence shows that it had, from the very beginning, the power of duration within it.

All great art has this duration. It is not subject to frequent change as is science. Changes fail to improve it. Recasting a symphony of Beethoven would not make it more beautiful, but less. It is the devotion with which it is played that bestows its beauty as human generations pass.

It is in this sense that we should, I believe, try to appreciate and understand the *Tsing Tien* system. It is a national thing on a great scale *that has kept within the limits imposed by nature*. Through this system, the Chinese have produced and maintained a productivity from the soil unexcelled elsewhere, and have supported a community of peasant-family farmers, the largest in numbers, the most skilful, the most contented and the most peaceful amongst the peoples of mankind.

The Chinese have, of course, had their misfortunes and occasional catastrophes. They have been beset by people without any settled system such as they enjoyed. Large landowners have from within sometimes destroyed the rights of the peasants, but the *Tsing Tien* system has been the thread upon which has been strung period after period of their long history.

Dr Ping-Hua Lee, in Volume 99 of *Studies in History* (Columbia University), writes:

‘The whole history of government administration of agriculture in China coincides with the history of the *Tsing Tien* system, for it started

Sample

with this system of land tenure. Its vicissitudes, its crises and epochs were timed by the abolition or re-establishment of the system ... It is fortunate for the economic historian that the history of the *Tsing Tien* system is coincident with China's political history.'

Thus in the small body of the Hunza and in the large body of the Chinese, though much disrupted by the recent and present havoc, we have rare survivals, instances of skilled and continuous life within the limits that are set by nature and the land; a skillful fitting of mankind into the life cycle of the planet.

The Chinese had not the stupendous secluding mountain wall of the Hunza, but for as far as their power could reach, they built such a wall – the Great Wall, stretching for 1,500 miles – to shut out the Tartar. They had not the control of their water supplies from their sources as had the Peruvians and the Hunza; the floods of their great rivers have their origins in huge ranges of stripped hills mostly outside their control.

Yet in spite of these foes of stability, their system endured until it was finally worn down by the constant attrition of contact with the West. Although it has been the West and its ways that have broken up this system, nevertheless sufficient of it is known, thanks to the Chinese predilection for written history, to see in it a supreme example of the Wisdom of the East in contrast to the Science of the West.

The *Tsing Tien* has been a system of a human partnership with the soil. In it was secured for century after century the comprehensive range of both the minuteness and grandeur of this partnership, which has by no Western writer been better expressed than by Hasbach in his unique *History of the English Agricultural Labourer*:

Sample  
20

‘Trifles are the very objects of the small cultivator; he has everything near him and under his eye, makes use of every small advantage, cultivates every corner, has the help of his wife, and brings up his children to be the most useful the country produces. Such men serve the land as it should be served, never stinting themselves, and as absorbed in their service as any priest in his religion.’

Upon this foundation stable civilizations have been built, and can be built again.

*Sample*

# Rome

**R**OME AND ITS CIVILIZATION were the progenitors of the civilized Western world; consequently, without knowledge of Rome's relation to the soil, it would not be possible for us to extract from history the principles of reconstruction from the soil.

We must study history, because in no other way can we tell what the Roman land was like and how it looked. History reveals that if, by some magic, we could transport ourselves back to the days of the early Latin farmers, we should see a picture of a well-populated countryside, with the land divided into a large number of small farms, often as small as five acres in size.

As each small farm had to support a family, the farming was intensive, so that the fields would have appeared crowded with a variety of crops. The bulk of the family's food and also that of its domestic animals came from the farm. We would see the various members of the family hard at work upon the farm – busy upon the land itself, and in the home and dairy.

We would see also a large number of prosperous villages. Other things would also be there – things of great importance, and soon to be described – some of which would be visible to the eye, and some not.

Now let us look at the same land some five centuries later. The picture is now quite different. We should see but few villages and few small farms, and upon the farms we should see what farmers call 'foul' fields and even land that

*Sample*

was derelict. In place of the multitude of small farms we would see mainly orchards, vineyards and dairy farms. It would, indeed, be quite clear to us that the main object of this different form of farming was to supply fruit, grapes, olives, milk and cheese to people who did not work upon the farms or in the villages at all, but who lived in Rome, the proud city that was soon to become the capital of the Mediterranean world.

We would also see that these estates were no longer worked by Italian farmers, but by quite a different sort of men – clearly not Italians, and men lacking the buoyancy and freedom of the older farmers. We should, indeed, have reason to rub our eyes, for some of these men, incredible though it might seem to us, would be shackled with iron and even chained to each other while they worked. These were slaves.

These are the two pictures we have seen; the first is that of family farming, the second that of capitalist farming.

Transporting ourselves to an even later date, we see a third picture. The land is now swampy and derelict, and its most significant products are now swarms of mosquitoes which cause the fevers that permit only a few wretched men and cattle to scrape together some sort of livelihood and that visit, with lethal effect, the inhabitants of the great but waning city of Rome itself. This last is the picture of debased soil.

Now let us see how history explains these three pictures.

\*

Of the farming of their ancestors the later Romans had no history. Nevertheless, a strong tradition existed, and that tradition placed both farming and farmers very high.

In the words of the elder Cato, to call a man a good farmer was in the past the best commendation, the highest praise.

*Sample*

Now this praise in the pages of *De Agricultura* must have been read a host of times without more than a general significance or regretful sentiment being attached to it. But modern discovery has shown that it had a very sound, practical significance.

The high esteem of the men of ancient Italy for good farming and the facts concomitant with it were not sentimental; they have been summed up with these words:

‘It is impossible, after surveying such elaborate undertakings, to avoid the conclusion that Latium in the sixth century B.C. was cultivated with an intensity that has seldom been equalled anywhere.’

This is the statement of a modern authority, Professor Frank. In short, the understanding of the later Romans of the wonderful farming of their ancestors was not founded upon sentiment, but upon fact. By the time of Cato and later writers, a good deal of sentiment had entered, and a good deal of fact had slipped away.

These later Romans knew that their ancestors had been great farmers, but they do not seem to have known the greatest part of their work. That has been revealed by modern investigators and particularly by the excavations of M. la Blanchère, published in 1893 in *Mémoires présentées par divers savants à l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*.

Professor Tenny Frank, the above-quoted authority in *An Economic History of Rome* (1927), summarizes la Blanchère's remarkable paper, which can be itself read in the library of the British Museum. The excavations reveal that Italy was the home of a farming culture which has seldom been equalled anywhere. It had a standard of farming equal to the great farming of ancient Peru, the farming of Asia Minor in its prolific days, the farming which Professor Vavilov researches, the farming of the

Sample  
24

Hunza – the farming, indeed, of many or even all great countries of the world in a time when farming reached a great height, only to later fall so steeply as to become oblivious to it.

Professor Frank begins his book on the economic story of Rome where it should begin – the soil. On the one hand, that soil was singularly rich, as rich as the loess soil of the Chinese and the alluvial soil of the Egyptians. It had not their depth, but it had the exceptional contribution of the ash of some 50 craters which are within 20 miles of Rome.

On the other hand, it was placed in a perilous situation if its farmers were to neglect it. It was a wide band or plain, the Campagna, situated between the sea and the steep Alban and Apennine mountains. Upon these mountains rain at certain seasons fell heavily. When there were trees on the slopes, then the rainfall was broken by leaf, twig and branch into a spray before reaching the soil. Where the trees were cut down freely or where the slopes were too steep for them to grow, the torrents of rain reached the earth to beat upon it and send streams of mud sweeping down to the plain. The short rivers between the mountains and the sea loaded with silt. Sometimes their mouths and thus the direct discharge of the water to the sea were blocked, and swamps replaced well-drained land.

Farming in this country, therefore, depended above all on one great feature of farming – proper drainage. Against heavy rain falling upon precipitous hills, the farmers had to protect the soil if they were to be successful. The men of Italy were great farmers, and they accomplished astonishing things.

La Blanchère, through his excavations, revealed in part what the farmers did. He found an extensive engineering system of water control and drainage, including numerous relics of drains, tunnels and dams. Professor Frank writes:

*Sample*

‘By diverting the rain waters from the eroding mountain gullies into underground channels, the farmers not only checked a large part of the ordinary erosion of the hillside farms, but also saved the space usually sacrificed to the torrent bed. It would be difficult to find another place where labour had been so lavishly expended to preserve the arable soil from erosion.’

Noting the finely trimmed polygonal masonry of the dams, largely made of blocks weighing half a ton each, the professor adds:

‘It, is impossible, after surveying such elaborate under-takings, to avoid the conclusion that Latium in the sixth century B.C. was cultivated with an intensity that has seldom been equalled anywhere.’

The men of Italy, later to be known after their capital city as Romans, began their unequalled story with a tremendous, vital force – that of an exceptional and well treasured soil. One can immediately realize the vigorous and profound respect for farmers and farming which characterized the Roman poets, prose writers and statesmen of much later ages, and their looking backward to their ancestors as men of exceptional fibre and character derived from their farming. They looked back to something exceptional in seeking the origin of the firm strength of Rome.

These great farmers, who protected their land from the torrential invasions of the climate, had also to protect it against the invasions of human beings – not just neighbours, but also those who had come over the Alps and Apennines in search of land. The farmers then proved themselves great warriors. Farmer and warrior contended within them, but as successes in war grew, so the warrior factor transcended that of the farmer, and the type of

*Sample*

farming changed.

The number of small farmers able to support themselves and their families well on less than five acres of intensive farming decreased. From the point of view of the soil, indeed, the story of Rome and its empire was largely a competition between warriors gaining land by conquest and exploitation, and farmers losing it because of enforced, inferior ways of farming, and through erosion. Amongst the splendour of Rome's achievements, this fundamental part of its story has hardly been recognised. In the end, it was the rebellious soil that broke the strength of the warrior.

It is understandable that, if farmers were liable to be called up for national service as warriors, intensive personal farming suffered. The farms could not be kept in good condition when many of the men who worked on them were away at the wars.

This drain began with the wars the Romans fought in or about Italy, but it only became critical at the time of the terrific struggle of Rome against Carthage, and particularly as the result of the fifteen years of Hannibal's warfare within Italy itself. That led to immense destruction, not only of the farmer-warriors themselves, but also of water channels, drainage, farm buildings, roads, bridges, trees, and other essential elements of intensive farming. When the war was over, the government of the victorious but exhausted Romans was faced with the question of the reconstruction of the land.

Now at the same time that this question became paramount in Roman Italy, it also became paramount in China. The Chinese Empire of that time was situated in the middle part of the Huang Ho (known to us as the Yellow River) basin and the great territories on either side of it.

To protect his empire against the warriors of the Tartars, the Emperor, Chin Chi Huangti, resolved to build a huge

*Sample*

fortified wall. To build it, he had to procure vast numbers of labourers, and these he had to take from the land. So he abolished the *Tsing Tien* system and the inalienability of the land which was the essential part of it, turned the peasants from their holdings, and sold the land to all able and willing to buy.

In both the Roman case and that of Chin Chi Huangti, the land was the chief source of wealth. The rich men, therefore, readily bought the land of the dispossessed peasant families. So, after the second Punic War in Italy and the building of the Great Wall in China, the rulers of Italy and China were faced with the same question – a question perhaps the most momentous of all in the story of mankind upon the earth: shall the common form of farming be by owners of small holdings, or shall it be that of large estates owned by a small class of wealthy men?

The Chinese chose the former method. After the death of the Emperor revolt broke out, his son was slain and the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) brought with it the long struggle between the imperial ministers – who aimed at the restoration of the *Tsing Tien* system of small family holders – and the new aristocracy of large landowners. The struggle was long and bitter, but in the end, except for some large estates which were considered necessary, the *Tsing Tien* system was restored.

This also restored the wisdom of the East, the basis of which was the direct relation of the great majority of Chinese subjects to the soil.

In Italy the same struggle occurred. It was also prolonged and bitter, but here always, albeit slowly, success turned away from small family ownership.

In the peace that followed the conflict with Hannibal, Roman statesmen strove to turn the clock back to the traditional ways of their forefathers, but Rome's conquests

and the great influx of foreign slaves to work the land in the place of the dispossessed peasants, in addition to the injury to the soil wrought by the war, weighed heavily in favour of the wealthy classes.

As in China, the land was the chief source of Roman wealth. There were, at that time, no large manufacturing towns, and little commerce. In the words of Professor Frank,

‘the ancient world has no record of any state of importance so unconcerned about its commerce as was the Roman Republic’.

On the other hand, working in favour of the small landowners was the firmly rooted belief that those who lived on the land were also the finest warriors, and the chief strength of Rome’s military power.

The great Roman writers were fully aware of this. Cato the Censor (234–149 B.C.) staunchly maintained that it was the farmers and tillers of the soil who made the best citizens and bravest soldiers.

Varro (116–27 B.C.) voiced the same conviction that country life in its form of peasant-farming was the chief strength of the State.

Cicero eulogized the farmer-citizens who left the plough to save the State, and used his unequalled art to protect the working farmers whose extinction was threatened by the growth of wealthy proprietors.

Virgil used his poetry to exalt the culture of the land and those whose hands produced it.

Horace also described the older type of farming as the best.

Columella, at the time of the Emperors Claudius and Nero (41–68 A.D.), declaimed against the poverty of the land which resulted from handing its cultivation over ‘to the unreasoning management of ignorant and unskilful slaves’.

*Sample*

Pliny the Elder, who wrote about the same time as Columella, championed those who worked their own land against the owners of the *latifundia*, or great estates, who abandoned the work to slaves and only kept their country houses so they could hold house parties for their friends. How was it, he asked, that there was so great a fertility of the soil in the past that seven *jugera* (a little over four acres) were held to be sufficient for a farmer and his family? His answer was that in those days, the lands were tilled by the hands of generals and soldiers. Pliny the Elder asked:

‘...whether it was that they tended the seed with the same care that they had displayed in the conduct of wars, and manifested the same diligent attention to their fields that they had done in the arrangement of their camp, or whether it is that under the hand of honest men, everything prospers the better by being attended to with scrupulous exactness?’

This conception lasted up to the time of Vegetius, in the fourth century, who bitterly regretted the abandonment of the ancestral ways, when he saw the poor quality of the military recruits.

The great Roman writers of the latter part of the Republic and the early part of the Empire, then, had a passion and a hope for the reconstruction of the family ownership of the land not only because the farmers were the healthiest, most honest, and most diligent members of the State, but because in times of danger they made the best soldiers.

The military leaders of the late republic were equally convinced of the value in character and physique of the farming class. When the supply of farmer-warriors failed, there seemed to be only one alternative and that was to start with warriors and, as a reward for their services, to give them land to farm.

Sample

Marius was the first to make the transition from farmer-warriors to warrior-farmers. He overthrew the tradition that only the propertied classes were worthy to fight for their country. He enlisted the proletariat, especially those who were living on the land, and rewarded their services with a gift of land. Slaves were never enlisted; their grievances were too great, and their numbers too many, for any Roman to dare or even dream of such a dangerous experiment.

When the change to empire brought its long years of peace, it brought with it good government, roads, reliable civil servants, self-governing city states served by an unequalled zeal on the part of public-minded citizens, greater humanity towards slaves, and great prosperity. Of the best part of these first two centuries (from the death of Domitian in 96 A.D. to the ascension of Commodus in 180 A.D.), Gibbon wrote:

‘If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he could without hesitation name the period between these two dates.’

Even then, the emperors, almost without exception, strove to revive the small family holdings. Augustus and his successors planted colonists on the land; Nerva spent millions in purchasing land for small farmers; generous laws dealt with the food of the agricultural classes; veterans were given free allotments; and Pertinax allowed squatters to occupy uncultivated fields even upon imperial estates, and to possess full ownership if they brought them into cultivation.

Nevertheless, in spite of these desperate endeavours to reconstruct personal farming, the power of money prevailed. The small farming class continuously and literally lost ground, and the wealthy class just as

*Sample*

continuously gained it.

In the place of the generous laws of the first two centuries of the empire, there came the restrictive laws of the last two centuries. Agricultural slaves were bound to the land. Heavy impositions and innumerable duties were loaded upon the large class of *curiales*, or members of the senates of the city-states and large villages.

This class of *curiales* included the landowners. As the demands of revenue became more exacting, membership of the *curiae* was made hereditary. The *curiales*, harassed by innumerable officials, duties that could not be fulfilled, poverty which withheld money from the land and forced them more and more to exploit their deteriorating soils, sought by every means to escape from their ruinous property and its duties.

Abbott and Johnson in *Municipal Administration in the Roman Empire* wrote:

‘Many of them abandoned their property and fled. Others sought to enter some vocation which would give them exemption from municipal charges. The emperors strove to check this movement by binding the *curiales* to their place of origin, and by forbidding them to enter any of the privileged professions.’

These measures failing, laws were then passed under which the property of *all* the *curiae* was made liable for the accumulated dues, the burden then falling on the less fortunate owners. Failure to pay led to the confiscation of property and its transference to the imperial estates which rapidly increased in all parts of the empire, and the tenants of which were exempted from municipal liabilities.

Some also fell to the owners of the great *latifundia*, who were strong enough to either resist the demands of the tax-gatherer or hand on the burden of taxation to their tenants,

Sample

who had originally sought their patronage as the only way of escape. The *coloni* or voluntary tenants were also bound to the soil, and in the fourth century were reduced almost to the level of agricultural slaves.

‘The only class in the municipalities not affected by imperial legislation was the proletariat. The practice of Rome in maintaining this parasitic element by private charity was unfortunately widely copied, and imposed a serious charge on the civic budget. Not only that but the glamour of ancient urban life attracted labour from the farms and other industries where a bare living was gained by arduous toil. In the city one could be fed at the expense of the State, and when the *capitatio plebeia* (a tax imposed by Diocletian on the working power of a man in good health) was removed from the residents of the towns, we cannot wonder that the urban movement went on apace.’ (Abbott and Johnson).

This downward spiral was both accompanied and caused by the continuous depletion of soil fertility. To this Italy, the imperial mother-country, was the most exposed, and upon her soil its effect was the strongest.

In the early days of Rome seven *jugera* (4¼ acres) were found sufficient for a family, and this was the original assignment given to the *coloni* as tenants of the state. Gracchus, however, found it necessary to increase the assignments to 30 *jugera*.

The fall in fertility due to the war against Hannibal forced upon much Italian land the necessity of large ranches devoted to the raising and feeding of domestic animals or to orchards. This necessity justified the economic brutality of the ‘enclosures’ of that time, under which land that had previously grown good crops of grain was taken from small farmers by the wealthy classes and turned into ranches.

This, in its turn, confirmed the dependence of the masses on imported corn.

Caesar, as evidence of the soil's further depletion, raised the assignments to 60 *jugera*, and Columella, writing about 60 A.D., asserted that a fourfold return of grain was unknown on Italian farms.

Finally, in the third and fourth centuries, the debasement of the soil completed itself. Much of Italy, once the parent of the sturdy strength of the Latin fathers, became a pestilential swamp. Provinces which had once been the native land of formidable legions were almost bereft of humanity. Flourishing towns dwindled to villages and disappeared. The proletariat of Rome ceased to exist.

The capitalists of Rome did not await the complete degradation of Italy. They transferred their capital at the call of Constantine the Great (288–337 A.D. ) to a new capital city on the shores of the Bosphorus, a city situated midway between the rich wheat lands that ringed the Black Sea and the inexhaustible fertility brought annually in the Nile flood. Abandoned Italy fell to Odoacer in 476 A.D.

\*

This story will be fraught with meaning to those conversant with – or by a perusal of these pages, about to become conversant with – the past story of agriculture in England and the present state of agriculture throughout the British Empire and other countries of the West.

Amongst other things, they will see the perilous significance of the attempt by the Nazis to conquer the world and bind subject peoples to slavery upon the land. This subjection of the land, against which so many of the great Romans vainly strove, represents the steady and irresistible march towards collapse of a civilization which values the soil as merely a money-making commodity, and not as the very source and creator of the life and health of man.

Sample  
34

## The Roman Foods

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, we did not address in depth the point that it was the intensive family-based agriculture in a favourable soil and climate which gave the early Romans their physiological vigour and virile character.

We have not proved the proposition, because it is not capable of proof on its own. It can only be presented as a reasonable supposition; that the quality of the food and the health of the individual that eats that food are related. All that we have been able to do, therefore, has been to offer certain facts bearing upon early Italy which will offer some explanation of the exceptional character of its inhabitants.

Let us now review the foods themselves from which this physiology derived. At the outset, we must accept that in history it is difficult to establish the quality and character of the food of a people, and in this the early Romans are no exception.

Dr K. Hintze, however, has in his invaluable *Geographie und Geschichte der Ernährung* collected such knowledge as his persistent scholarship could reveal. What Hintze is able to tell us about the foods of the early Romans is not copious, but nevertheless it is fully in accordance with the diets of some of the most virile people in the world today.

In the previous chapter, we saw what great care was given to the cultivation of food. That is of primary importance. One may presume that with such skilled and laborious cultivation, the soil, itself endowed with excellent natural gifts, provided healthy and well-growing vegetable and

Sample

animal food. There is no contemporary information, says Hintze, about the foods of early Italy; there are only the traditions, supported by modern research, of what it had been.

Of grains, there was barley, wheat (emmer) and millet. There were no mills, but the grains were crushed in a mortar and the husk removed. The grain was then made into a porridge and eaten with salt. The grains were often lightly roasted so as to make the removal of the husk easier. Later came the hand mill, in which the grain was crushed between two millstones.

The student of nutrition and dietetics will at once note that *only the husk* was removed. The porridge was thus wholemeal porridge and, if flat cakes of bread were made, they too were wholemeal. This traditional porridge, Hintze surmises, was the staple food of all early Romans, who ate alike, as there was little or no food distinction between the classes at that time.

Then came vegetables and fruit. There were cattle, but flesh was seldom eaten, except on the days of religious festivals. The animals were kept for work upon the farm, for the provision of manure, and for milk and cheese, which were an important part of the diet.

The grape was cultivated in Italy in pre-Roman times, but in early Roman agriculture it seems to have played no part. Its culture, however, did reach Italy at some date, and the inhabitants then drank wine. Whether they drank wine made from other juices, as was the habit of the later Romans, is unknown. Barley beer, the drink of northern peoples, never found favour.

The food of the early Italian farmers was, therefore, lacto-vegetarian, a diet which has won high praise from Sir Robert McCarrison and other distinguished modern nutritionists as being the food of many of the healthiest and strongest

peoples of the present day. If a healthy soil can be assumed, then the early Romans had in their food all the necessary elements of physiological excellence. (The lacto-vegetarian diet is not the only healthy whole diet. There are other such diets – that of the Eskimos for example, in which the eating of the whole carcass of animals plays almost as prominent a part as it does in the diet of the beasts of prey.)

The lacto-vegetarian diet of wholemeal grains, fruits, vegetables, and milk and its products, as McCarrison has shown, is the basis of the excellent health and physique of the Hunza, the Pathans and the Sikhs of North-western India and, with a more precarious supply of grain and vegetables, of the Arabs and Baggaras.

What proportion of milk and its products was added to the vegetables and fruit eaten by the early Romans is not known. Their value was, one would think, firmly established among the population, some of whose ancestors came from central and eastern central Europe. It was certainly a tradition handed down to and maintained from the early days of the republic.

The *latifundia*, or large estates, of the later republic largely specialized in milk and milk products, as well as wines and olives, and left the growing of corn largely to the provinces. They raised cows, sheep, goats, horses and asses, and the milk and cheese of the milks of all these animals were consumed.

Cossinius discusses the qualities and differences of these products just as connoisseurs discuss wine. Nothing perhaps shows more vividly the immense gap that exists between the sophisticated urban diets of today and that of early and middle republican Rome than this serious devotion to milk and its byproducts.

It is in this lacto-vegetarian character that the early Roman diet is similar, as has been said, to that of many

Sample  
37

of the healthiest people of the present day. It is in their intensive cultivation of the land through family-based farming that they resembled the Chinese, Koreans and pre-modern Japanese. It is in their traditional reverence for the nutritional qualities of milk and its products, however, that they differ from these far-eastern peoples, whose land supports so numerous a population that there is not sufficient to support a large number of domesticated animals as well.

It is in the combination of the two – intensive cultivation and the culture of dairy products – that the Roman diet most resembled that of the Hunza people of the western Himalayas, who are probably unsurpassed in physique and health by any other people of the present time. Moreover, certainly in mid and later republican times, and therefore possibly in the early Roman period, a great quantity of different fruits were cultivated in Italy, so that Hintze declares that

‘...at Varro’s time, all Italy resembled a fruit garden.’

In this generous provision of fruit, the early Roman diet resembled that of the present-day Hunza, who eat great quantities of fresh and sun-dried fruits. It also included great quantities of dates, which those other people of superb physique, the Arabs of Arabia, eat.

As regards early Roman agriculture, the intensity of which has already been described, Frank praises its practical efficiency. Professor Whitney, in *Soil and Civilization* (1926), describes the Roman knowledge of such principles and practices as:

- recognition of the different types of soil and the crops suitable for them;
- recognition of the need for local knowledge of the soil;

Sample

- preservation of the soil by successive generations of families, farming in areas where they themselves were born and bred;
- use of legumes, similar to that seen in the agricultural history of the Chinese:
- avoidance of any waste upon the farm, all animal and vegetable refuse being returned to the soil as manure;

and other technical features of agricultural practice which a competent student of practical agriculture such as Whitney is qualified to write about. I wholeheartedly refer the interested reader to his work.

There is therefore, I think, quite sufficient evidence to presume that the Romans and their neighbours belonged to those people who by long adaptation to a repetitive, well-cultivated, sound diet, seem to have acquired an absolute harmony with their food, and were themselves a people of exceptionally good physique and health.

The foundations of their domination of the western world included their diet and their agriculture; and paradoxically, the changes in both that played such a large part in the downfall of Rome came with the spread of that very dominion.

\*

The change among rural Italians was much slower in its progress than it was among the rapidly increasing urban populations. The rural people were of course affected by the changes described in the previous chapter, but their foods were still locally produced; milk and its products, grains, vegetables, fruit, oil, wine and occasional meat.

It was upon Rome and other major urban centres that the chief effect was felt.

The bread or porridge of the lower classes was now

*Sample*

prepared, not from local grains, but from grain imported across the seas from Egypt and northern Africa. Emperor Tiberius said to the Senate:

‘The sustenance of the Roman people is day by day being tossed about at the caprice of wave and storm.’

But that is almost all that can be said with accuracy about the urban lower classes and their food. Hintze laments that

‘...unfortunately, as concerns the life of the smaller folk, comprising the mass of the population, we can learn practically nothing from the writers of the time.’

It is a very different story regarding the wealthier classes of later republican and early imperial Rome. Their change from the simplicity of their ancestors to a life of luxury and indulgence were frequent themes of the writers of the time. Taste and the temptations of delicate dishes replaced the satisfaction of robust appetites. Dinner (*cena*), beginning about 3 p.m., became a cult. Individually and socially, it occupied by its duration alone (three or more hours) a considerable part of the day.

Hintze gives a list of the various foods which reached the tables of the empire: milk, cheese, honey, wine, wheat, barley, millet, beans, lentils, peas, cabbage and other leafy vegetables, tubers, beets, turnips, radish, salad, onion, cucumber, celery, mushrooms, truffles, dill, mint, garlic, coriander, mustard, pepper, cardamon, olives, grapes, apples, oranges, lemons, dates, pears, plums, cherries, figs, quinces, apricots, peaches, almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, fruit-wines of apple, pear, pomegranate, mulberry and other juices, mutton, goat, pig, deer, boar, chamois, antelope, hare, spiced meats, smoked meats, hams, goose, chicken, ortolan, bunting, starling, thrush, dove, peacock,

Sample  
40

flamingo, guineafowl, fish, mussels, crabs, lobsters and oysters. Beef was not much eaten, the bullock being kept for labour, and the cow for milk.

There was, therefore, a complete change from the ancestral lacto-vegetarian diet to one drawn from all parts of the available world by the fame and wealth of Rome.

The new diet had what has been termed the 'virtue' of variety. Whether the incentive of variety or the adaptation of familiarity is better for individuals cannot be answered. As far as I can tell, the question is one of those which has had little attention paid to it.

One can only repeat facts. This varied diet is essentially one of wealthy urban or urbanized classes, and it entails gradations downwards to the masses of the urban population. Immediately below the upper class, which gets the pick of the food, there is a grade which gets the foods that are in excess of those required by the rich, or those slightly too spoilt for the fastidious palates of the wealthy. So the diet passes downwards, contracts, and changes to that of the lower classes, who, in the case of Rome, depended for their staple food on distant countries.

It is most important, however, to realize that the defects due to poor food are *acquired* defects and therefore they are not, in the commonly accepted view of modern science, inheritable or inherited defects. Any poor Roman, who by wisdom or fortune, received a good diet from conception onwards, would show the better physique and health which that diet ensured. As for the rich, their varied diet, judiciously used, clearly gave opportunity for health and fine bodily quality, for the rich mostly had estates and other means of access to good milk, cheese, oil, fruit, vegetables and corn.

The rural population, like the wealthy, had access to fresh food. The growing of wheat in Italy did not come to

Sample  
41

an end. Professor Frank writes:

‘In Nero’s day, Egypt sent about five million bushels of wheat to Rome annually, while Africa sent about twice as much. That would suffice for the capital alone, and reveals why cereal culture could be neglected in the vicinity of the city. But the rest of Italy had a population of about fifteen million, and they would require more than 150 million bushels a year. We must conclude therefore that wheat was very extensively and successfully raised during the first century.’

The foods of Rome during the period of its greatest power may then be summed up broadly in four categories:

*Firstly*, there were the home-produced foods of the Italian countrymen on their small farms. These resembled most closely, of the four groups, the traditional foods of their ancestry. To what degree they did so is impossible to determine, for as H. Stuart Jones says in *Companion to Roman History* (1912):

‘though there is good evidence in the literature and inscriptions of the early Empire that the small holding was far from extinct in 100 A.D. and later, we know so little of its working that we can only describe the *fundus* of the capitalistic landowner as Cato and Varro picture it.’

*Secondly*, there were the home-produced foods of the slave-worked *latifundia*. Under the late republic the condition of the slaves was wretched in the extreme; under the empire their lot was gradually ameliorated. Their foods were presumably not the equal of the first group. Moreover, the specialization of the estate limited the number of foods compared to that produced on the general farm.

*Thirdly*, there was the varied diet of the wealthy classes, comprised of fresh foods from their own or neighbouring farms and estates, fish from the seas and rivers, and luxury

42  
Sample

foods imported from abroad.

*Lastly*, there was the food of the lower urban classes. Of this F. Marshall, in Sir John Sandys' *A Companion to Latin Studies* (1921) writes:

‘a kind of porridge of wheat, like that eaten in early republican times even in imperial times continued to be eaten by the lower classes ... with green vegetables, seldom meat.’

Grain was apparently still consumed wholemeal rather than refined. As to its quality, there is no means of comparing it with the wheat or emmer and other grains of early Italy, but its wholemeal character was certainly preserved. This is about the only fact of importance one can gather from what is known of the food of the urban lower classes. Nothing is known about their access to dairy foods.

\*

Summing up, one may assert that compared to the foods produced by the farmers of early Italy, that of the first group approached – but owing to the increasing difficulties of the farmers, cannot have reached – that of the early period.

The food of the second group, of the agricultural slaves, was certainly inferior.

The food of the third group, the wealthy, is less comparable. It is not possible to state, but it is possible to imagine that it produced a greater variety of human qualities. That it also brought with it the deterioration of over-luxurious and intemperate eating is certain. Nevertheless, the daily life of its eaters, their gymnastics, games, and bathing suggests the persistence of a good level of bodily health and physique.

The food of the fourth group, the poorer urban class, was certainly inferior.

\*

Sample

With the failing of Italian agriculture, there came a degeneration of foods and their quality, and subsequently a corresponding degeneration of those who consumed those foods. When considering the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, the degeneration of its foods must certainly be an important, if not the primary, factor.

This suggests that no empire can endure if the agriculture of the motherland deteriorates. The process is naturally a slow one and as such was not realised by the Romans as a whole, but it was certainly recognised by many of its prominent thinkers, writers and politicians.

*Sample*

# The Roman Family

THE GROUP BY WHICH the farming of early Italy was carried out was the family. A slave of that time was treated as one of the family, and took his or her part in general work and domestic life for the most part without degradation. The family and the cultivated soil were indissolubly connected; the family was pledged and wedded to the land. The very form of marriage, that of monogamy, was dictated by the soil. The farm provided the family group with food, clothing, shelter, fuel, and an overflow of produce for exchange for goods produced by others. It gave security to the children and old people, and that security was continuous, so long as the soil was well-husbanded.

The unique knowledge of the family was that of their farm and all that affected it. To the family, its land with its particularities was as alive and unique as their own lives. The creation of children to continue the family was, therefore, an aspect of their relationship with the soil.

The farming family was inevitably religious, being so bound with the life of the earth, in which it was itself an active participant in the act of creation. In death resides the inevitability of the resurrection of that which, united with the soil, again becomes alive.

Every schoolboy, recalling his Roman history, is familiar with the stern figure of the *pater familias* – the head of the Roman family who preserved the form of that family, punishing any member of it who endangered its

Sample  
45

corporative existence, and who did not in extreme cases hesitate to inflict death upon his own flesh and blood.

Ordinarily, one may presume, as member of the family he was probably not so totally grim, but the fact that he had those traditional powers showed that the family was cultivated with as great an intensity as the land. His summoning of the family at the beginning of the day to worship the household gods is an example of the way in which life upon the farm was an extension of the religious life of the time.

The family was large or extended, which is the form particularly correlated with the intensive hereditary cultivation of small farms. It consisted of the father and mother, their sons and grandsons with their wives and children, and their unmarried daughters. The men worked upon the land and for the State, and the women worked for the family.

Outside the family, women generally had no recognized place. She inherited her portion of the family land, but that was for her security, and not to give her individual scope for agricultural skill or toil. She was the mother and the housewife, and in all matters was subordinate to the father.

It was he who had the absolute legal right to decide whether a child born to him or in his family should be reared or not. It was he who ordained the death of a defective child, or one threatening the family unit by overpopulation. Mommsen states:

‘The maxim was not suggested by indifference to the welfare of the family. On the contrary, the conviction that the founding of a house and the begetting of children were both a moral necessity and a public duty had a deep and earnest hold of the Roman mind.’

*Sample*

But the family had above all to be strong, both in its own composition and as a functioning part of the State. It had to be strong because the proper service of the soil demanded physical strength, and a strong State – one that could successfully defend itself against invaders and aggressive neighbours – had to consist of strong family units. The family was, indeed, the very essence of the State.

Romaine Patterson in *The Nemesis of Nations* (1907), wrote:

‘Of all Roman institutions, marriage was the most sacred. The family altar, transmitted from one generation to another and holding a fire which had been lit by ancestors who had been dead for centuries, was the central and most impressive fact in the life of a Roman burgess.’

The economy attached to this sanctity of the family has been described as a ‘natural economy’. After the Punic Wars, there arose a rival; the ‘money economy’.

The new rich, in the main, were new men; the *equites*. The older landed aristocracy, as was to be seen later in other nations, were not a match for the new men. It was the *equites* who made and controlled the money economy in all its various forms. They paid rents, taxes, customs, excise and other duties. They controlled the import of food, the slave trade, and the creation and circulation of money.

The most certain path to the new wealth was the profession of banking. Only exceptional cleverness or luck in speculation built up wealth more rapidly than did banking, and this very speculation was supported by the bankers. Almost all who took out credit fell into the bankers’ debt trap. Successful politicians depended upon the backing given to them by the bankers.

Capital, labour and competition, unknown in the natural economy, became commonplace under the

Sample  
47

money economy. The bankers became indispensable, and eventually the State itself became an exposition of their power and influence; everything hung from them as the staples of the State. Property ownership became concentrated – the tribune Philippas, quoted by Cicero, stated that there were only 2,000 property and landowners in the whole Commonwealth.

The effect upon the institutions of the family and marriage was profound; they both began to lose their meaning. As the sacredness of marriage and the family faded, it was with the women of the upper class – the class which practically monopolized the pens of the great Roman writers from which we get our information – that the change of values is most vividly illustrated.

The Roman matron of the past now became nothing more than a figure of tradition. The object of the new class of fashionable women was the *reverse* of that of the displaced mistress of the home and family. Her desire was to avoid by all possible means the appearance of being matronly. To conceal all appearances of advancing years – to look young, attractive and ripe for adventure – that was the goal of the new women. Their culture was that of beauty, and their scarcely concealed ambition was to occupy themselves with love affairs without fruition.

Perhaps as a form of revenge for the secret desolation of their wifehood and motherhood, they wasted public resources with lavish prodigality. Fashion and beauty cost so much that thousands of slaves throughout the empire were necessary to support them.

Their passion for personal freedom divided them from the few children which they had. The younger folk, on their part, freed themselves from the shackles of parental authority. The authority of the father vanished into the past, along with the role of the mother.

Sample  
48

Family elders, once honoured as the storehouse of experience, wisdom, and links with the past, were now cast aside and ignored, branded with the stigma of irrelevance in their old age.

I cannot better substantiate the accuracy of this picture of upper class Roman women than to quote Theodor Mommsen's account in his *History of Rome*. He is describing the time when society had first achieved a high degree of luxury, thanks to the wealth that accrued from the exploitation of Rome's widespread provinces, and the great number of slaves which filled the place in the Roman world that machines were later to fill in the industrial era. He wrote:

'Morality and family life were treated as antiquated things amongst the ranks of society. To be poor was not merely the saddest disgrace and the worst crime, but the *only* disgrace and the *only* crime.'

He described the effect upon society women:

'Liaisons in the first houses had become so frequent that only an exceptional scandal could make them the subject of special talk; judicial interference seemed now almost ridiculous.

An unparalleled scandal, such as Publius Clodius produced in 61 B.C. at the women's festival in the house of the Pontifex Maximus, although a thousand times worse than the occurrences which 50 years before had led to a series of capital sentences, passed almost without investigation and wholly without punishment.

The watering-place season – in April, when business was suspended and the upper classes congregated in Baiae and Puteoli – derived its chief charm from the relations both licit and illicit which, along with music and song

Sample  
49