

## The Corn Law Rhymes

By FRANCIS NEILSON

### The Cry for Political Liberty

FROM TIME TO TIME, the nations of Europe have provided us with songs of poetic national ardor which linger in our memory. Three might be mentioned, which will be sufficient to set us thinking of others: *Rule Britannia*, *The Marseillaise*, and *Deutschland über Alles*. The songs of the Italians in Garibaldi's day were sung by children long after he left the scene. The Greeks, too, chanted their national hymns when Byron was at Missolonghi; and the Poles were rich in folk song, the themes of which are distinctly noted in Chopin's piano pieces. Most of these, however, were cries for political liberty, and perhaps that is the reason why some of them are remembered.

England of the days of James Thomson and Cowper indulged in national hymns of a strident character. *Rule Britannia* and *The British Grenadiers* can scarcely be surpassed in comic braggadocio. National aspirations can, of course, be carried to excess, and small wonder that, at different times, the French and the Germans have poked fun at the English for their extravagant claims.

Washington Irving, in "The Sketch Book," had a good-humored tilt at John Bull's bellicose nature. Other Americans took far too seriously the claim of Thomson in *Rule Britannia*.

When Britain first, at heaven's command,  
Arose from out the azure main. . . .  
This was the charter of her land  
And guardian angels sung the strain. . . .

In recent years the English poured scorn upon *Deutschland über Alles*. There is something amusing in all this, because so much of the sentiment depends upon who is your political and military friend at the moment. Still, we cannot overlook the fact that national songs have their value as rallying media when a crisis arises.

### Economic and Social Poems

THERE ARE SONGS that are not national, which left their mark upon generations of folk—these were economic and social. Somehow they are little thought of today, but they inspired wonders, accomplished by the

masses in making their grievances known to the powers that oppressed them.

About the middle of the thirteenth century, William Langland wrote his poem, "Piers Ploughman." In this we find a vivid description of the condition of the common folk of his day. Concerning that period there has recently been published the story of "The Peasant's Revolt, 1381" by Philip Lindsay and Reg Groves (Hutchinson & Co., London, 1950). It is a remarkable historical document and should not be overlooked by students who are working upon the economic history of the English people, for the book contains much new matter, and places the revolt in its true setting.

Lines from Langland's poem inspired impoverished men and women for generations, and perhaps gave them courage to voice their grievances in many crises. The people who rallied to the standards of Wat Tyler and Jack Cade were illiterate peasants, but they learned from poor clerks in minor orders the significant passages to be found in such poems as "Piers Ploughman."

There was nothing of nationalistic boastfulness in these odes. They revealed a plight of the people that was one of despair, and for centuries John Ball's question was asked:

When Adam delved and Eve span  
Who was then a gentleman?

This was an echo of the lines to be found in "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle":

At the beginning we were all created equal; it is the tyranny of perverse men which has caused servitude to arise, in spite of God's love; if God had willed that there should be serfs, He would have said at the beginning of the world who should be serf and who should be lord.

A long history lies behind the revolts of the masses, centuries before the Corn Laws were abolished, but it is in this last period I would search for those songs that reached the ears of statesmen and forced them to redress the grievance of the wretched.

#### The Poets' Cry for Justice

THE NAMES of the poets who wrote the verses the people learned and sang for a generation before the Hungry Forties include many of the highest rank. Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and many others are an array of men whose genius can scarcely be surpassed by those of any other land. Byron's clarion cry rang out:

Snatch from the ashes of your sires  
The embers of their former fires;  
And he who in the strife expires  
Will add to theirs a name of fear  
That Tyranny shall quake to hear.

From one end of the land to the other, the poets gathered to express the woes of the people and to urge them to make their poverty known and demand justice. In Burns' lines there is the same strain that we found in "Piers Ploughman."

What tho' on homely fare we dine,  
Wear hodden gray, and a' that;  
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine—  
A man's a man for a' that.  
For a' that, and a' that,  
Their tinsel show, and a' that;  
The honest man, though e'er sae poor,  
Is king o' men for a' that.

"Man's inhumanity to man" was the theme of peasant-poet of Scotland; and nobleman Byron—rich poet, poor poet, too—took up the strain, all in the long tradition since the days of William Langland.

What a history it is, and how little we regard it today! Perhaps we need another James Russell Lowell to remind us of our duty and also of the work to which Lincoln set his hand. We talk so glibly today about freedom and liberty and "our way of life" that a stranger would think, to hear us cackle, that there was no such thing as poverty and restriction in the land. Lowell wrote:

Is true freedom but to break  
Fetters for our own dear sake,  
And with leathern hearts forget  
That we owe mankind a debt?  
No! true freedom is to share  
All the chains our brothers wear,  
And with heart and hand to be  
Earnest to make others free!

A daring Wordsworth, if there were one today, might write:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

## The Aftermath of Enclosure

LONG BEFORE the Corn Law rhymers set to work, the sound of distant thunder was heard in many poems. Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" must have reminded many a vicar of a small community of the desolation caused by enclosure of land by force and by Act of Parliament. The exodus from the country to the towns created a congested labor market and drove wages down to the point of penury.

Perhaps it was George Crabbe who sounded the first alarm in his poem, "The Village." There he describes the condition of the parish workhouse:

Theirs is yon house that holds the parish poor,  
Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;  
There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,  
And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day;  
There children dwell who know no parents' care;  
Parents who know no children's love dwell there;  
Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,  
Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed;  
Dejected widows with unheeded tears,  
And crippled age with more than childhood-fears;  
The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!  
The moping idiot and the madman gay.

This awful picture of "the place of refuge" of England's poor contained perhaps the spark that fired the imagination of many a poet that came after its author. Sir Walter Scott, in his last days, often asked for some poems of Crabbe to be read to him. And Cardinal Newman considered "Tales of the Hall" to be "one of the most touching in our language." Its author is now forgotten, but his place in the revolt against poverty is assured.

Byron has described in "The Age of Bronze" the condition of England and the ambition of her landlords. In this poem he presents to us the statecraft, the foreign policy, and the futility of her recurring wars as no one else has done:

Alas, the country! how shall tongue or pen  
Bewail her now *uncountry* gentlemen?  
See these inglorious Cincinnati swarm,  
Farmers of war, dictators of the farm;  
*Their* ploughshare was the sword in hireling hands,  
*Their* fields manured by gore of other lands;  
Safe in their barns, these Sabine tillers sent  
Their brethren out to battle—why? for rent!  
Year after year they voted cent. per cent.,  
Blood, sweat, and tear-wrung millions—why? for rent!

They roar'd, they dined, they drank, they swore they meant  
To die for England—why then live?—for rent!

Goldsmith had put this in a single line: "Laws grind the poor, and rich men rule the law." The poets were outspoken in that day and did not hesitate to speak fearlessly to those in authority about the woes of the hungry. The Merrie England of the maypole and the dance had been swept away as if a cyclone had struck the villages. Yet, there was merriment in high places, and there were revelry and mirth at court, and in the houses of the rich. It took long years to impress the government with the fact that the economic disabilities of the wretched should receive its attention. The influence and zeal of Lord Suffield were of no avail. Referring to the condition of the country, he tells us he could make no impression on Lord Melbourne, who looked upon the subject as a bore.

About that time Shelley wrote "Men of England." The verses have the roll of thunder and are filled with the warning that the lightning will strike:

Men of England, wherefore plough  
For the lords who lay ye low?  
Wherefore weave with toil and care  
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

The seed ye sow, another reaps,  
The wealth ye find, another keeps;  
The robes ye weave, another wears;  
The arms ye forge, another bears.

With plough and spade, and hoe and loom,  
Trace your graves, and fill your tomb;  
And weave your winding-sheet, till fair  
England be your sepulchre.

Perhaps the songs of Ernest Jones stirred the people more deeply than the poetic protests of Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley. Jones' "A Song of the Lower Classes" was remembered by country folk for two generations after it was composed. The writer of this essay has often heard an agricultural laborer whisper some of its pregnant lines, when no squire was about to hear him.

We plough and sow—we're so very, very low  
That we delve in the dirty clay.  
Till we bless the plain with the golden grain  
And the vale with the fragrant hay.

We're low, we're low—we're very, very low—  
And yet when the trumpets ring  
The thrust of a poor man's arm will go  
Through the heart of the proudest king.

We're low, we're low—our place we know,  
 We're only the rank and file;  
 We're not too low to kill the foe,  
 But too low to touch the spoil.

If we had poets today who wrote such lines, I presume they would be condemned as outright proletarian propagandists inspired by Moscow. But when the deepening distress of the Hungry Forties could no longer be ignored by Parliament, no one had the temerity to castigate the poets who wrote memorable verse which revealed the shameful degradation of the folk. Moreover, there were by that time men in Parliament who knew the facts and presented them courageously to the government. Both Cobden and Bright, to say nothing of Villiers, called for redress of grievance; and so impressive were their demands that they converted Sir Robert Peel, whose government abolished the Corn Laws.

#### Repeal of the Corn Laws

IT IS THE FASHION now, and has been since Marx's day, to question the sincerity of these free traders, accusing them of selfish aims and the desire for an abundance of low-paid labor. The people who are guilty of making this charge overlook the facts that not only Gladstone and Disraeli paid tribute to their honesty and courage, but that also the Conservative party, the landlords' one, after a few years became as free trade in sentiment as the Liberal party itself.

The statistics of the advance made in the industrial activities of the people after the abolition of the Corn Laws and after the breakfast-table duties were repealed by Gladstone, show the most astonishing recovery of individual welfare, without any assistance from the State, that can be found in the annals of any country.

The cry of the Corn Law rhymers was effective without the aid of a Wat Tyler or a Jack Cade. The poets did more, perhaps, to convince the people that they could save themselves than even Cobden and Bright succeeded in doing from the platforms. Wathen Call's "The People's Petition," written when the distress was most painful in the Hungry Forties, was recited in full by an old agricultural laborer at a political meeting as late as 1906:

O Lords! O rulers of the nation!  
 O softly clothed! O richly fed!  
 O men of wealth and noble station!  
 Give us our daily bread.

For you we are content to toil,  
For you our blood like rain is shed;  
Then lords and rulers of the soil,  
Give us our daily bread.

The Minor Poets

THE MINOR POETS who read the longings of the people in their distress wrote what the miserable were thinking and dared not mutter. Some of them described their woe in the vernacular, and scores of lines that might have been penned by a Shelley or a Byron can be taken from their verses. Often they reach an elevation of poetic quality that is surprising. In Gerald Massey's poems there are many such lines. For example:

And love should spring from buried hate,  
Like flowers from winter's tomb.

Tom Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" and Elizabeth Browning's "The Cry of the Children" are so well known that it is scarcely necessary to mention them. The poems of Arthur Clough and Charles Mackey may be found in the anthologies.

In *The Times Literary Supplement* of December 2, 1949, there was a review of the work of Ebenezer Elliott. He wrote *God Save the People*. It became known as "The People's National Anthem," and it was sung at Nonconformist religious services, and especially by the men at the great Brotherhood meetings. Perhaps it was the most popular of all the verse written by the Corn Law rhymsters.

It is hard to tell why the work of Ebenezer Elliott has been overlooked by some of the anthologists of a generation ago, for Carlyle's essay, "Corn-Law Rhymes," written for *The Edinburgh Review* (1832), deals with one of the most extraordinary characters in England of that period. Elliott was a prosperous iron and steel merchant of Sheffield; indeed, one of the minor bourgeoisie.

The man who wrote "Dream of Enoch Wray" deserves to be remembered. Carlyle's essay is instructive for those who would understand the tribulations of the English poor in Elliott's day. He says in his review:

. . . Alas, how many brave hearts, ground to pieces in that unequal battle, have already sunk; in every sinking heart, a Tragedy. . . . Must it grow worse and worse, till the last brave heart is broken in England; and this same "brave Peasantry" has become a kennel of wild-howling ravenous Paupers?

The writer of the review of Elliott's work, which appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, reminds us:

. . . Between 1830 and 1840 he had risen to a position in English poetry in which his contemporaries looked on him as the peer of Crabbe and Burns. He counted his friends in all ranks of society. His sincerity and vigour had won him the respect of critics of widely differing views. He had been foremost in opening new fields for poetry and, in Herford's words,

he may claim to have carried out that part of Wordsworth's poetic programme from which Wordsworth himself "averted his ken" and given his voice to

the fierce confederate storm  
Of sorrow barricaded evermore  
Within the walls of cities.

What the people would have done without the poets for the generation that followed Waterloo is hard to tell. Private members of Parliament might have succeeded at length in voicing their claims in the House of Commons and brought about relief. But such poems as were written were learned by heart by thousands who could not read, and were repeated at the firesides of those who felt the misery. The poem is remembered. The speech is forgotten. The latter serves for the time of the meeting, but the verse that described the condition of the mass touched the soul of those who had no chance to hear such men as Cobden and Bright.

The children of those who lived in the Hungry Forties remembered the lines, and for two generations after the abolition of the Corn Laws, old men who could tell the story of their parents' suffering would, if they had confidence in one, repeat the verse their illiterate fathers had learned.

Many of these poems were used by Socialists at their meetings fifty years ago, but apart from the desire for brotherhood, there is no Socialistic sentiment in any of them. All the people wished in the middle of the last century was to have a chance to better themselves by their own endeavor and enjoy the fruits of their labor. They desired relief from the crushing burdens imposed by the system of protection. This was the reason for the great battle that took place, and it was won in Parliament and not at the barricades.

Is it a poet that we need to make plain to our Congressmen that there are distresses now that afflict the people and should be relieved? Alas, our poets have other themes, and there seems to be no one, since Carl Sandburg wrote his early verse and Edwin Markham wrote his "Man with the Hoe," to voice the thoughts of those who find our way of life no easy matter, with all the crushing taxation, the restrictions upon thought and speech, and the horror of war and its consequences.

Somehow we do not realize that a generation is poor indeed that has no post to speak for the people. And the contrast between the versifiers



today—their themes, their forms, and all the modern gadgets of style—is so wide, when compared with the men who championed the desires of the people over a hundred years ago, that old folk who remember vividly the history of stint and pain despair of finding a people's poet.

*Port Washington, N. Y.*

### *Multiple Crop Insurance*

MULTIPLE CROP INSURANCE (now available in 55 counties of the United States) provides protection to the insured against loss on his insurable crops due to unavoidable causes such as drought, flood, hail, insect infestation, plant disease, winter-kill. It is part of the authorized program of the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation. Legislation provides that multiple crop insurance shall not be provided in any county unless written applications for insurance are filed which cover at least 200 farms or one-third of the farms producing the insurable commodities, whichever is the lower. Each insurance unit will be counted as one farm in meeting this requirement.

The insured is protected on annual crops each year generally from the time of seeding to the completion of harvest. For crops other than annuals the protection extends generally over the growing period. Only one application and one policy is needed by a producer for all his operations in a county. In the multiple crop program a farmer insures all of his insurable crops under one contract and the protection offered is against loss from all insured crops combined. This plan thus gives the diversified farmer protection against the loss of the major part of his total investment in most of his crops rather than against a smaller part of his total investment which may be represented by some one or two crops.

There is a coverage established in dollars for the insurance unit based on the number of acres planted to the various insured crops. The premium is based on the number of acres and interest in each insured crop, the risks on the various crops, and the extent of diversification. To avoid the inconvenience of periodic renewal, the policy has no termination date and continues in effect from year to year until canceled by either the insured or the Corporation. For the protection of both, the policy specifies a date for each county prior to which cancellation by either party must be made for any crop year. Notices of changes, if any, in the contract will be mailed to the insured at least 15 days prior to cancellation date.

T. SWANN HARDING

*USDA, Washington*