



The Landless of Sicily

By JULIA BASTIAN

"Land Reform is like ice-cream, you wrap it up in paper and by the time you get it home the paper's all wet."

WHAT IS "WASTE?" A farmer would say that when broccoli rots or an apple falls to the ground they are "wasted" because they cannot be sold. Yet the rotten vegetable and the windfall apple provide food for insects, which in turn keep the soil sweet and are themselves tasty morsels for the smaller animals. In the great scheme of things there would seem to be no waste at all, in anything — since everything ultimately has some purpose.

Yet from another viewpoint, that for instance of the Sicilian reformer Danilo Dolci, waste is proliferated everywhere, in everything. Dolci and a group of followers have together collated impressive documentary evidence on various forms of waste to be found in western Sicily. Here, in the wild agricultural area he knows so well, waste is found side by side with poverty, illiteracy, violence and unemployment. There is appalling waste of human life, waste of time and talents, efforts and opportunities. There is waste of what few natural resources are available — especially water — and waste of government money squandered on foolish schemes. Dolci's picture of Sicilian economy is a grim one; his enemies are ignorance, superstition and monopoly, which stem, as he sees it, from the Mafia, the Church and the State.

"But," says Dolci, "public and private charity are not remedies. Neither the re-distribution of small plots of land, nor the encouragement of emigration are enough. There is more to be done." As a start he has written three books,* the last possibly his best, and all must alert the people of Sicily, the Italian Government and the Church of Rome, to the dangers of evading the real issues. The real issues, of course, are economic.

What sort of people is Dolci trying to alert? The Sicilians appear to be a wild lot. Most of the men carry guns and are in the habit of taking pot shots at each other in a casual sort of way. A dispute over land or cattle, or a girl, will build up to a crisis until a furious Sicilian kills his neighbour in the street. A murderer may get ten days in prison to cool off.

Wages are pathetically low. A cowherd can earn 20,000 lire a month (about £11 10s.) and his family must make do on that. In Corleone, which is virtually one huge chicken run, with poultry in every street, an egg will cost fifty lire — or about 5d. Children of eight years old are already working as labourers. Very few go to school.

There is disorder everywhere. According to one observer: "There's not a town where a road will not be built and then taken up to put in the drains, and then taken up once more to put in the water pipes, and then relaid all over again from the start."

There appears to be no control whatever over what is spent on public works. Another Sicilian explains: "If ten million lire is set aside, not more than six million are spent on the works. The rest finds its way into the pockets of officials and others. The inspectors are bribed to turn a blind eye and then it's a free for all!"

In such things the Sicilian is much like his brother in other corners of the world; man's nature does not change. And, like his brother, his life-blood is in the soil. Nowhere is a change of heart and mentality towards land more needed or more overdue.

At present the agricultural labourer, or *mezzadro*, is given a piece of land which he is allowed to work for one year. The proprietor, or land owner, is supposed to supply implements and divide the profits fairly. After the year is up the land may be taken away and given to someone else. Naturally, with so little security of tenure the wretched *mezzadri* work only grudgingly. If they were sure they couldn't be turned off the land many would probably plant orchards, clear the ground of stones and build drainage ditches. But few are willing to do this for the benefit of the next fellow in.

When things get really bad, governments will agree to give land reform a trial. In Sicily it has not been successful. "Just like going to buy ice-cream," we learn from the disillusioned founder of one co-operative. "You wrap it up in paper and by the time you get it home the paper's all wet."

In the early 1920s the Fascist government brought in a law dealing with uncultivated and badly cultivated land, and a number of co-operative farming enterprises were formed. A piece of land would be leased to the co-operative and divided into holdings. Each man with a holding would be obliged to pay the dues (about 6,500 lire per year). On average about twenty families would take on six hectares each.

At the beginning they felt a big lift in morale; it was as though they had been raised to the level of land owners and had some importance politically. And for a time they had more to eat. But the real owner of the land was, of course, the State, and the farmworkers in their co-operatives were simply in the position of state

* *To Feed the Hungry*, *The Outlaws of Partinico*, and *Waste*, by Danilo Dolci, MacGibbon and Kee, *Waste*, 42s.

employees. After a few years the scheme began to look shaky. During the depression of 1929-30, Dolci tells us, the Government agreed to grant loans-in-aid to all co-operatives "having clearly-defined social aims." A loan would be re-payable over twenty-five years. By 1955 a few of the more obviously successful co-operatives were able to pay off their loans, but the majority, hopelessly in debt to the Bank of Sicily, were owing millions for farm machinery.

Today few holdings can be described as "going concerns." The average one will provide only about sixty days work a year for the holder, and little work for his family.

Dolci points out some reasons for the failure of this kind of land reform, such as the inadequate size of the holdings and the inefficiency of the machinery. Allocations are often muddled up by officials who sort out names from thousands of applications in a lottery. People from one village may be assigned land some forty kilometres from their homes, while those from nearby are assigned land near the others' village. A labourer may



lose two days a week getting to and from his holding. Sometimes the schemes fail because the people have no faith in each other. When the holding is worked collectively and the profits are divided there is much disagreement. Even the farm labourer can see that land reform shouldn't be like that. To add to all the confusion the Sicilians have developed a special state of mind which prevents them from carrying out any improvements today that are not subsidised by state grants.

Dolci sees the remedy in justice, more discipline and hard work. He believes that his books may prove of value to some of the many backward townships in Italy and Sicily, as indeed they may, and form a basis for discussion on how local resources may be put to the best possible use. He adds that if anyone has information or advice to give, he and his colleagues will be grateful to receive it.

The advice we would give is this: Urge the Government to introduce the only kind of land reform that can be successful — that is, where each man works his own land on his own, and with his own people. That way everyone will give all he has.

The way to achieve this is to secure equal rights to land by establishing the communal ownership of land rent in place of private ownership, at the same time removing taxes from individual labour.

As more and more individuals find themselves responsible for cultivating their own holding, the government will find itself with a continually increasing source of

revenue from land value — particularly in the towns. The former tax on the products of individual labour will not be missed. New private enterprise schemes will flourish as never before. Children will attend school in a society that grows every year more orderly because its people have found the best outlet for their energies. Instead of playing at bandits the young Sicilian may learn to build things with wood and stone; he may even grow up to be a master mason instead of a murderer.

This way Nature need not be so wasteful.

WELFARE'S FEET OF CLAY—(contd. from page 79)
in the trickster's pocket than in their own. In private life common sense frustrates the trickster, but not in public affairs.

Beneath all these phenomena one detects one common assumption. That somehow, in the nature of things, everyone must depend for his prosperity on positive acts of the state, conferring privileges upon his class, trade or profession. Even the poor are no longer poor; they are the "underprivileged." The state is the source of wealth.

Who, looking on the world today with its strife of races, nations and classes, and the overwhelming evidence of moral decay, all of which the welfare state and planned economy have patently failed to arrest, can honestly dismiss as "out of date" or "irrelevant" the reforms advocated by Henry George, merely by assuming without investigation that they cannot apply to the space age? The mere passage of time cannot change fundamental principles.

THE PROPER REMEDIES—(continued from page 78)

grants in the world will not induce people to set up industries unless they are convinced that their business, when properly under way, will be profitable."

In addition to the gain to the industrialist, however, there are three other advantages to be considered. First the factory would go where it was needed—where there was unemployment—but without any artificial inducement or direction by the government, and without any appeal to social conscience. Secondly, the workers employed by the factory, though paid less than others elsewhere for a time, would have avoided the most extreme poverty and the loss of self-respect in not being able to get a job. Thirdly, society itself would gain in three different ways: socially, because some of its members would be more independent and contented; materially, because it would be enjoying increased production; and financially, because it would have saved the cost of relief.

There would have been no loss whatever to anyone during this process of adjustment, and it is to be hoped that eventual reform within the trades union movement will remove some of the obstacles to that natural mobility of industry which could clearly be so big a help in maintaining full employment.