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THOUGHTS  
ON  
THE POLICY  
OF THE  
PROPOSED ALTERATION  
OF  
THE CORN LAWS.

“ While the greatest quantity of our poor lands was in cultivation—  
“ while there were more than usual restrictions upon our commerce,  
“ and very little corn was imported—and while taxation was at its  
“ height, the country confessedly increased in wealth with a rapidity  
“ never known before. Since some of our poorest lands have been  
“ thrown out of cultivation—since the peace has removed many of  
“ the restrictions upon our commerce, and notwithstanding our corn  
“ laws, we have imported a great quantity of corn; and since  
“ seventeen millions of taxes have been taken off from the people,  
“ we have experienced a degree of distress, the pressure of which  
“ has been almost intolerable.”

MALTHUS.

LONDON:

JAMES RIDGWAY, PICCADILLY.

1827.

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**T**HE Corn Bill, now before Parliament, forms one of a series of measures which have been introduced by Government, of late years, with a view to keep down the price of grain in Great Britain, by encouraging the competition of foreign corn with the growth of our own soil, when prices have attained a certain level.

It is unnecessary to go into any detailed history of those measures. By Lord Londonderry's Bill, in 1822, the monopoly price of wheat, which had been secured to the British agriculturist at 80*s.* per quarter, by Mr. Robinson's Bill, in 1815, was reduced to 70*s.*, when the ports were to be opened, on payment of a duty, on foreign wheat, of 17*s.* per quarter, during the first three months, and of 12*s.* thereafter. By the Bill now introduced, the monopoly is to be altogether taken away, and the ports are to remain open at all times, on payment

LONDON:

PRINTED BY T. BRETTELL, RUPERT STREET, HAYMARKET.

of a duty, varying according to price, but which will disappear when the average rises to 70s. And a similar reduction will be made in the protection to be afforded, in future, to other kinds of grain.

Both Mr. Robinson's and Lord Londonderry's Bills were announced as intended to fix the law permanently; notwithstanding which, important innovations, and, uniformly, to the prejudice of the agriculturists, have been repeatedly made, sometimes by act of parliament, and sometimes by orders in council: and, from the principles which are sanctioned at present, it appears far from being improbable, that a farther reduction of the protection now conceded, may be proposed by ministers, in the course of a very short time.

Certainly, the vacillation and the want of practical information, which have been displayed by Government cannot fail to be very alarming to the agriculturist. Even within these few weeks, and after two years of secret and solemn deliberation, so slight a knowledge had been acquired of those details, on a perfect acquaintance with which any safe and comprehensive system of protection must be founded, that propositions were brought forward, with regard to the relative value of wheat, barley, and oats—and of oats, and oatmeal—so decidedly theoretical and erroneous, as to render it necessary to abandon them almost as soon as they were enunciated.

The great difficulty and obscurity in which the question of the Corn Laws is involved, appears to me to arise from the vagueness of the principles assumed as the basis of legislation. Until these principles are fixed, and the Legislature determine with accuracy what definite object is to be kept in view, in ascertaining the extent of protection to be afforded to British agriculture, it is impossible to reconcile the very opposite opinions which are entertained on this subject.

On the one hand, the agriculturists are anxious to obtain high prices, which will afford high rents to the landlords, and large profits to the farmers, without any view to ulterior considerations. On the other hand, the trading interests are anxious to reduce rents and profits to as low a rate as possible, with a view to the extension of foreign commerce; the future prosperity of which, they say, depends, in a great measure, on a low rate of wages, and an increased exchange of British manufactures for foreign corn: while a third party, headed by the ministers of the crown, maintain, that the interests of all the great branches of industry are involved in the prosperity and depression of each other; and they are desirous to hold the balance fairly, and to afford equal and impartial protection to all.

The last, is the most plausible view of the subject; but I am much inclined to fear, that some very important considerations do not receive their due weight from its supporters.

The question appears to me to be considered too exclusively in a commercial point of view ; by which I do not mean, that it is considered solely as relating to its effects on trade and manufactures, properly so called, as distinguished from agriculture, but that the agriculturists are looked on merely as a great manufacturing and trading class, whose capital is employed in the production and commerce of grain, and who are entitled to, and should obtain protection in a greater or less degree, on commercial principles alone, and as connected with the facilities afforded to other traders and manufacturers engaged in the increase of individual and national wealth.

But the subject ought to be considered in a political, as well as in a commercial point of view ; and, in the present situation of the country, its political bearings appear to be peculiarly important.

Notwithstanding the low average price of corn during the last twelve years, and the beneficial effects which, it is said, low prices ought to produce on commerce, this country has sustained the most violent and repeated convulsions of embarrassment and distress, which, during the present crisis in particular, have pervaded our whole internal relations, to a most alarming extent.

There is something very anomalous in this general embarrassment ; for, whether we regard the powerful political influence which this country exerts over all foreign nations, or the freedom and

liberality of our institutions, the intelligence and good faith of our government, and the vast accumulation of wealth, which has rendered England the centre of the commercial and financial transactions of the world, a long course of uninterrupted prosperity might, to all appearance, have been safely anticipated after the termination of the general war.

Yet so it is, that, in the twelfth year of profound peace, this great nation has been shaken to its foundations ; and a feeling of confidence as to the future, is, at the present moment, far from being restored.

By some, the difficulties under which the nation labours are attributed to a wasteful expenditure of the public money ; and it has been even said, that the pressure of the national debt can be no longer supported. Others ascribe our embarrassments to the late wild speculations, originating in a disordered state of the currency and an undue issue of bank notes ; while a revision of the Corn Laws, and the free admission of foreign grain at a moderate protecting duty, is held by many to be a certain *panacea* for all our distress.

I conceive, that none of these theories are adequate to account for the extent of the evils of which we complain.

There appears to be every disposition, on the part of our government, to lighten the burdens of the people, so far as is consistent with political

security. Within the last ten years, more than twenty millions of taxes have been repealed; and, though a farther reduction of taxation would, no doubt, be highly desirable, when it can be made with safety, I am at a loss to discover how the existing distress could either have been prevented or alleviated by the remission of taxes to a somewhat farther extent, since the expenditure of Government must, in consequence, have been reduced in a like proportion. It is a constitutional grievance, if the expenses of Government are too great, for the influence of the crown is thereby unduly increased; but, in so far as encouragement to successful industry is concerned, it is evident, that, whether the revenue is frugally administered or otherwise, a curtailment of government expenditure must be accompanied by a diminished consumption of commodities, to an extent equal to the increased facilities to purchase, obtained by those to whom taxes are remitted.

The burden entailed by the national debt is oppressive; but that debt is contracted—the faith of the nation is pledged to recognise it—and it is more than doubtful, whether the confusion and ruin, the utter breaking up of all confidence, and of public and private security, and the degradation of national character, resulting from any forcible reduction of the value of our public engagements, would not infinitely counterbalance any pecuniary advantage derived to us from such a source.

If capital has perished from imprudent speculations, much more than sufficient remains for carrying on the real business of the country; for it is notorious that, at the present moment, no want of capital exists, though the difficulty of employing it safely and beneficially is most severely felt. Restrictions on the issues of bankers, however necessary for the security of the public, can have but a very temporary effect on the abundance or scarcity of money, or on great speculations, arising from a facility in obtaining loans. Capital circulates in many forms besides that of bank notes; and it will find the means of transmission in one shape or other, with more or less rapidity, and to a greater or less extent, according to the demand, and to the security offered. Fictitious capital is, no doubt, increased by undue issues of notes; but the extent to which such have been carried, bears a small proportion to the amount of the real capital of the country: nor will accommodation-paper ever be discounted, to any large amount, in notes of a low denomination.

Lastly, if the agriculturists have been deriving considerable benefit from their monopoly, at least their profits have been generally expended within the country, in the employment of labour, and the purchase of manufactured goods. Certainly, it cannot be denied that the distress is not to be attributed to an elevation, of late, in the price of corn; and had corn been cheaper, and wages

lower, in the years 1824 and 1825, the accumulation of unsaleable commodities would, in all probability, have been greater than it actually is.

To what cause, then, are our embarrassments to be mainly ascribed? The answer, I think, is obvious: to the over-production of manufactured goods, and that to an extent which cannot be immediately consumed, however low, prices may be reduced. Yet, the system now proposed to be adopted, with regard to the Corn Laws, is intended, by its promoters, to act as a powerful stimulus to the increase of manufactured productions; but it is expected that the national wealth will be greatly increased by an extended demand from abroad, which will absorb the extended production of our manufacturers, notwithstanding any diminution of the consumption at home, in consequence of a limitation of the demand in England, from a falling off in the means of the agricultural interest to purchase.

The mere rapid accumulation of national wealth, however, ought never to be the paramount object of legislation; and if this object alone is pursued in the conduct of affairs, our favourable anticipations will be almost invariably disappointed.

The first duty of Government is, to provide for the stability of the constitution, and for the moral and political interests of the people; and if it can be shewn, that any system of policy, however, specious and even brilliant it may appear, hazards

the injury and degradation of that class of the community where the surest safeguards against violent fluctuations of credit, and against political innovations, are to be found, then it may be surely declared, that such a system is fraught with manifest danger to the nation at large.

It can scarcely be denied, by any but the wildest political economists of the day, that the agricultural body hold this important position in the state. On their well-doing, not only the wealth and influence of the aristocracy depends, but also that of the invaluable class of small proprietors, which binds together the whole country population of England, from the peer to the peasant; and, in order to maintain this bond of union, and the wholesome influence of the proprietors of the soil, who, with their numerous dependants, both in town and country, amount to half the population, it is necessary to enable them, not merely to exist and to carry on the cultivation of the land, by adapting their style of living to reduced incomes and profits, but to maintain the position which they occupy in prosperous times.

Let me not be understood to undervalue the advantages of commerce and manufactures; no man, possessed of common understanding, can be blind to the benefits which they confer on the whole human race; least of all, in England, so well fitted to take the lead in the commerce of the world, can it be maintained, that the interests of

commerce should be neglected. I am ready to admit, that the prosperity of trade and agriculture depend mutually on each other; but, in my humble apprehension, the prosperity of trade, in order to be steady, must, in a country like Great Britain, be founded on a healthy and flourishing state of agriculture. When the extension of trade is so founded, it is steadily progressive; and the advantages which it confers on agriculture are progressive in like manner, and re-act on trade, both foreign and domestic, and again on agriculture, in an increasing ratio, and to an unlimited extent.

Those branches of trade which are not founded on the prosperity of the home market, must, from the very nature of things, be fluctuating and uncertain. They may, in many instances, enrich individuals, and even be productive of great national advantages; but their prosperity and decline depend, in a great measure, on foreign relations, which are not always under our control.

The great extension of our foreign commerce is now working powerfully throughout the empire, and new features are rapidly developing themselves, which indicate a remarkable change in the whole body politic.

Immense masses of population are becoming congregated in an overgrown capital and in the manufacturing districts, with different feelings and different interests from the inhabitants of the

country, and those masses are yearly and daily increasing with a rapidity unknown in former times.

The great bulk of this city population is chiefly supported by commercial undertakings: while commerce is prosperous they live comfortably, and even luxuriously; but their habits do not lead them to lay up the means even of bare subsistence for a period of depression, and when that period arrives, they are reduced in vast numbers to extreme misery, and to a dependance for their very existence on the charity of the public.

I am far from being disposed to depreciate the quiet and patient spirit which has been so conspicuously and so creditably evinced of late by the distressed workmen throughout Britain; but it is also too plainly to be observed, that a political feeling has been for some time gradually extending itself among the working classes in the great towns, founded on what they conceive to be the exclusive interests of their caste; while a consciousness of the power of their increasing numbers and intelligence, and the facilities which they can, and so frequently have made use of for combination, will render them every day more formidable, in the event of their being incited by distress and by designing agitators, to desire important changes in the government and in the distribution of property.

The state of the manufacturing population is at

present tranquil, and their numbers may not yet be such as to excite any immediate apprehension as to the ability of Government to secure the peace of the country, and to protect the constitution against violent aggression. But we cannot easily forget what has already happened; and that at no remote period, a disposition to very serious mischief was indicated on the part of the working classes in our great towns, when goaded on by distress and by political principles of a very dangerous description.

In order to check and subdue this disposition, the strenuous exertions of the well-disposed part of the community were required in aid of Government, and even a suspension of some of the fundamental laws of the constitution was deemed necessary—an evil of itself of no small magnitude; and the consequences of the frequent recurrence of which, as regards the permanent increase of the power of the executive, it is not easy to foresee. On the other hand, any further considerable addition to the manufacturing population, while the agricultural population is weakened and diminished, must give rise to very serious apprehensions as to the progress and final result of repeated and organized attempts to effect political changes of a revolutionary character. While the difficulty of carrying large and increasing masses of a manufacturing population through a period of destitution must inevitably augment, and would present evils of the

most serious and alarming magnitude, were any permanent check to be given to our foreign commerce by war, or by the successful rivalry of other states.

In any view, the recurrence of seasons of stagnation and distress is, I am afraid, too surely to be anticipated. For, in a great, wealthy, and intelligent country, speculation will always receive encouragement, and a constant tendency of production to press more or less on consumption must be the result.

The avowed object of the new Corn Law, is to steady the price of corn considerably below the average of the last twenty years, and thereby to render all commodities cheap. It may appear paradoxical; but I do not hesitate to affirm that, in the present state of this country, we cannot afford to live cheap. Cheapness of commodities involves a high exchangeable value of money; but loaded as the nation is, with a debt of eight hundred millions, a high exchangeable value of money would increase the pressure of the debt, and render the burden too grievous to be borne, when the same amount of taxation would come to be levied on a greatly reduced scale of prices.

It is of no consequence to the industrious classes, whether commodities are exchangeable within the kingdom for a higher or lower nominal price, provided the prices of different commodities, and the wages of labour, bear their due



and relative proportions to each other. High or Low Prices are of importance, only as regards the state of the foreign exchanges, and our foreign commerce, and general relations. But nothing has been observable in the state of the foreign exchanges for many years past, which can render it necessary to depress prices, so as to force up the value of money on that account. And it is at best extremely doubtful, whether a low price of corn would enable our manufacturers to lower the wages of their workmen, in proportion to the fall in the price of bread; so as, by diminishing the expense of production, to export goods on more favourable terms to foreign markets.

Indeed, when it is considered how little manual labour, comparatively, is now employed in the production of manufactured goods, and how much is performed by machinery, it is obvious, that the addition or subtraction of a penny or two in the price of a loaf of bread, must have a most insignificant effect on the cost price of manufactured goods, coupled, as the price of corn is, with the ability of the whole agricultural population, to contribute that share of the taxation of the country, which is at present levied from them.

In point of fact, experience shews, that cheapness of provisions does not always tend to lower the wages of labour, but has frequently a contrary effect.

When a labourer can support himself and his

family cheap, he is generally indifferent to work; he labours only for a few days in the week, and spends the remainder in idleness and dissipation, and he requires the temptation of high wages to induce him to renounce these indulgences: but when provisions are dear, he is thankful to get work, and offers his services on moderate terms.

The truth is, however, that the expenses of the labourer are not so materially affected by the price of corn as seems to be very generally taken for granted. In prosperous times, his purchases of bread do not amount to one half of his expenses; his principal outlay being in house-rent, furniture, dress, fuel, candles, soap, salt, tea, sugar, and other articles of domestic consumption, besides butcher's meat, beer, potatoes, and other vegetables, the price of which may be said to be in some degree regulated by the price of corn. For supposing that each member of a labourer's family, consisting of himself, his wife, and three young children, consumes annually one quarter of wheat (which, I believe, considerably exceeds the true estimate), and that the price of wheat is 70s. a quarter, the total charge, at the end of the year, for his five quarters of wheat, is £.17. 10s.; and supposing the earnings of the same labourer and his wife to amount to 21s. per week (which is certainly a moderate allowance in fair times), this rate of wages will give him an annual income of £.54. 12s. If, therefore, this labourer expends the whole of

his wages, the cost of the wheat which his family consumes, at 70s. per quarter, is less than one-third of his expenses.

If the price of wheat should be reduced 10s. per quarter, the labourer's saving will be just £.2 10s. on five quarters. The reduction in his wages, of which this saving admits, is from £.54 12s. to £.52 2s.; and if a reduction of £.2 2s. more takes place on those other articles, the price of which is in some measure regulated by the price of corn, then £.50 of wages will go as far as £.54 12s. did when the price of wheat was 10s. a quarter higher; admitting a reduction, altogether, of less than one-eleventh part of his wages—certainly much too trifling to produce any sensible effect on the cost price of manufactured goods.

A fall in the price of bread can only be advantageous or otherwise to the manufacturing classes, as it may affect the power of their customers to purchase their commodities; for it is on the steadiness of demand for goods, from whatever cause it may arise, that manufacturing prosperity must depend. But the power of millions of the manufacturers' best customers to purchase, is regulated by, and diminishes and increases in a much greater proportion than, the price of bread rises and falls. If the average prime cost of bread is 8d. a loaf, and it is sold for 10d., there remains 2d. for rent and profit: but, if by foreign competition, the price is reduced to 9d., the loss of the agricul-

turists is one-half of their former gains, while the advantage to the consumer is only one-tenth. And the same reasoning will apply at whatever rate the prime cost of bread may be taken.

But, it is said, the manufacturer will obtain an increased demand for his productions in exchange for foreign corn. It is, however, difficult to see, how an increased demand from this source can meet a diminution to the same extent in the home market; since, up to that point, every shilling which is gained by the foreigner, and which may, or may not, be laid out in the purchase of British manufactures, must be obtained by deducting it from the gains of the British agriculturist, who expends all his profits within the country, and from whom the quickest and surest returns are obtained.

In considering the amount of protection which should be granted to the British farmer, it has been usual to estimate it merely at the increased cost of production, arising from the weight of taxation falling on the land in this country, as compared with others; but calculations of the taxes and burdens, which are borne by the British agriculturists, as compared with their rivals in Poland, afford very inadequate data for ascertaining the amount of protection which the former require. The very different style of living, both of farmers and field-labourers, is, by far, the most important consideration in determining the rela-

tive prices, at which the productions of the soil can be brought to market in Britain and in Poland; and if this consideration is to be set aside, then, in order to enable cultivation to be carried on in Britain, in competition with Poland, our whole country must be portioned out among a few great landlords; the class of small proprietors and farmers must be reduced to the rank of peasants; and the agricultural labourers must submit to live in hovels, to subsist on the coarsest food, and to be clothed in rags.

Certainly, I do not mean to affirm, that the scale of protection, which is now offered, will reduce the country population to the level of that of Poland; but I do think I am entitled to maintain, that its tendency is *towards* that consummation, since the scale of protection proposed, involves a much lower average price of corn, than the average of the last twenty or thirty years, and a consequent material diminution both in the rent of land, and in the profits of the farmer.

For the manner in which the system is intended to work, is this. In years of very abundant crop, foreign competition will be nearly excluded, and the price left to steady itself as low as it will go, according to the plentifulness of the harvest, and the accumulation of former years; but when the crop is deficient, a maximum will come into operation, beyond which, prices can scarcely ever be expected to rise in time of

peace. That is to say, the farmer will be protected most, when he has least need of protection; and when he requires it most, protection will be withdrawn.

The new Corn Bill is expected to keep the price of wheat steady, at about 60s. per quarter, Winchester measure; and the price of other corn, in proportion, being somewhat under the average prices of the last ten or twelve years; certainly, a period of greater agricultural distress, than had been previously known in the modern history of this country.

But it is assumed by Ministers, for I am not aware that any proof has been adduced to support the assumption, that a fair and suitable protection would be afforded by the price which has been mentioned.

Even on the supposition that a price of 60s. is a sufficient remuneration in years of tolerable abundance, it is evident, that the protection afforded, is not sufficient to enable the farmer to obtain remunerating returns, when the crop is deficient. When the deficiency amounts to one-fourth of an average crop, the farmer has only six bushels of wheat to sell, where he had eight in average years; and if there were no foreign competition, prices, in order to yield him the same returns as in an average crop, must rise one-third, or from 60s., the assumed remunerating price, in average years, to 80s. per quarter. And, in like manner, when

the crop is deficient one-third, and the farmer has only  $5\frac{1}{3}$  bushels to sell, instead of 8, prices should rise one-half, or to 90s.

For 8 bushels at 60s. per quarter	} give 60s.
6 - - - - at 80s. - - - -	
and $5\frac{1}{3}$ - - - - at 90s. - - - -	

Nay, even these advanced prices will not make up for the farmer's loss on the diminished produce of his crop, because the quantity retained for seed, and the consumption of his servants and cattle remaining the same, in bad, as in good years, the quantity of grain he can bring to market, will diminish, in a much greater proportion, than a calculation, founded merely on the short coming of his crop would give.

If, in these circumstances, an importation of wheat should take place, equal to the whole deficiency, and the imported wheat can be sold at 60s. per quarter, there would be no rise in price at all; and, if the importation is equal to half the deficiency, there would then be in the market, in the first instance, 7 bushels instead of 6; and, in the second instance,  $6\frac{2}{3}$  bushels instead of  $5\frac{1}{3}$ , and prices would rise only in proportion to the reduced deficiency of supply, viz. to 68s. 7d., and 72s. respectively.

For 7 bushels at 68s. 7d. per quarter,	} give 60s.
and $6\frac{2}{3}$ bushels at 72s. 0d. per quarter,	

The consequence must be, that, in years of such deficiency, so supplied, the farmer will only be able to sell at 68s. 7d. and 72s. instead of 80s. and 90s. respectively, which last prices, it has been shewn, he would require, in order to keep up the due proportion of the remunerating return held out to him—being, in the first instance, 11s. 5d., and, in the second instance, 18s., less per quarter, than the prices he ought to receive in terms of the promised average protection.

And a similar state of things will occur, should the crop of barley and oats be deficient instead of wheat.

With regard to the ability of the importer to sell his wheat, in the circumstances supposed, at the above-mentioned prices of 68s. 7d. and 72s., it appears, from Mr. Jacob's Report, that the average price of wheat, at Dantzic, for five years, from 1820 to 1825, was 26s. 2d. per quarter\*; and if the prices of 1826 are added, the effect will be, rather to diminish the average than to increase it.

	s.	d.
Take, therefore, the average price of the last six years, at Dantzic, at . . . . .	26	2
Add for rise of price, in consequence of the demand from England, when the crop here is deficient one-fourth—say . . . . .	28	5
Prime cost, at Dantzic . . . . .	54	7

\* Jacob's Report, p. 25.

	s.	d.
Prime cost, at Dantzic . . . . .	54	7
Charges of importation . . . . .	10	0
Duty, in England, when the averages are at 68s. 7d. . . . .	4	0
Price at which the importer can sell, in England, wheat purchased at Dantzic at 54s. 7d. . . . .	68	7

Again, when the deficiency in England is one-third of an average crop.

	s.	d.
Take average price at Dantzic, as before . . . . .	26	2
Add for rise of price when the crop here is defi- cient one-third . . . . .	8	10
Prime cost price at Dantzic . . . . .	61	0
Charges of importation, as before . . . . .	10	0
Duty in England when the averages are at 72s. . . . .	1	0
Price at which the importer can sell, in England, wheat purchased at Dantzic, at 61s. . . . .	72	0*

As to the quantity of grain which it would be necessary to import to supply a deficiency of one-fourth, or one-third, in the home market, it depends entirely on the actual production and consumption of the United Kingdom, to which it is extremely difficult even to approximate.

\* I have thought it better to make all the calculations in Winchester measure, notwithstanding the imperial measure is now adopted in the Corn Bill, because the returns of prices of foreign corn have been hitherto made in Winchester measure. The comparative prices in either measure must, of course, produce the same result.

It has been calculated by one of the most zealous advocates of free trade\*, at 12,000,000 of quarters of wheat, and therefore may not unreasonably be supposed to be rather under than over that quantity. The calculation, indeed, rests on the assumption that one quarter of wheat is consumed annually by each individual, in families whose habits and circumstances admit of the use of wheat bread—that is to say, that, in those families, each individual, man, woman, and child, aged and infants, sick and well, consume nearly two quartern loaves of fine or coarse bread per week; an estimate which, as far as the experience and information goes to which I have had access, very largely exceeds the actual consumption.

But, supposing the consumption to be really twelve millions of quarters of wheat, a deficiency of a fourth would amount to three millions of quarters, and of a third, to four millions—and supposing one half only of the deficiency to be supplied from abroad, the importation in the first case would be just 1,500,000 quarters, and in the second case 2,000,000 quarters. Even if the whole of this quantity should be brought from Dantzic, Hamburg, and the other ports in the north of Europe, and none from France, Odessa, the Mediterranean, or America, I think it will be generally admitted that a sufficient allowance has been made

\* Edinburgh Review, No. 88, p. 323.

above for any very probable rise in price at the northern ports, consequent to a demand to that amount; and, certainly, when it is taken into account that the British markets will be open to the whole world, so considerable a rise as has been allowed above to be occasioned by an importation of 1,500,000 or 2,000,000 quarters, is highly improbable.

I am aware it is maintained by some, that so large a supply cannot possibly be obtained in one year; but the difficulty of ascertaining the quantity of grain to be found, even in our own country, at any one time, is well known: and, if I mistake not, the calculations which Ministers themselves formed, not many months ago, on this very point, apparently from the best sources of information in different parts of England, have turned out to be very erroneous.

Indeed, when we consider the large importation of oats, amounting to upwards of 1,000,000 of quarters, which has *already* taken place this season, chiefly from the Baltic, notwithstanding an avowedly deficient crop of oats on the Continent of Europe, the closing of many of the ports, during winter, by natural causes, and the assurances of the best informed persons, that, in such circumstances, not more than 200,000, or 300,000 quarters could have been obtained,—it may not be unreasonably anticipated that a very considerable deficiency in the crop of wheat, in this country, will be,

not merely in part, but in whole, supplied by importation at prices below what have been above estimated; and the British farmer will thus be almost, if not altogether deprived of the advantage of any rise in price in years of deficient crop.

The object of the Corn Bill is to keep the price of corn steady at a moderate rate—to prevent those fluctuations which, it is said, are injurious to the agriculturists themselves. It is, however, I fear, a vain attempt to procure steadiness of price by a free trade, since it appears that the greatest fluctuations occur in some of those countries in which great freedom, both of import and export, exists. The price of wheat at Vienna, on the 4th of March, 1815, was 43s. 10d.; on the 14th of September, 1816, 116s. 10d.; and, on the 30th of September, 1817, 59s. 8d. per quarter. In 1818, the price varied from 41s. 2d. to 23s. 3d.; from 1819 to 1824, it varied between 16s. 4d. and 34s. 2d.; and on the 24th of September, 1825, it fell to 14s. 7d.\*

Fluctuations in price are the necessary and natural consequence, in a great kingdom, of the variableness of the seasons. In years of deficient crop, the farmer cannot sell his grain with his usual profit, unless a considerable rise in price takes place. If he is forced to sell at little more than an average price, he must sustain an injurious loss;

\* Jacob's Report, App. p. 137, *et seq.*

but, under the new system, he will have no choice. The high prices which he ought to receive in deficient years will be nearly excluded in taking the average of his gains, while he will not dare, and, indeed, in most cases, will not have sufficient means to enable him to retain a portion of his crop in abundant years, to supply the deficiency of his scanty harvests.

The tendency of the occasional recurrence of deficient crops must therefore be to diminish his profits, even in years of abundance; for, supposing 12,000,000 of quarters of wheat to be an average crop, and that, this year, the produce of the United Kingdom amounts to 13,000,000; under a system of high protection, 1,000,000 quarters would be retained in the farmers' granaries and stack yards, which, should next year's crop prove deficient, would tend very materially to keep prices from rising too high, while the farmers would obtain a good return for the corn which they had reserved: but if the farmers are precluded from the advantage of a rise of prices, in deficient years, there can be no inducement to store grain in abundant seasons; because it will be well known that, as soon as indications of a short crop in this country appear, corn will be brought in by the speculators in large quantities.

In consequence, the quantity of corn offered for sale, in plentiful years, will be greater than it would otherwise have been; prices will be kept

low, and the profits of agriculture diminished, even at those times when importation is not actually going on.

Far be it from me, however, to maintain that the people of this country should be left to be distressed by want, when the harvest at home is deficient, and a supply can be obtained from abroad. All I contend for is, that the British farmer should not be mocked by an appearance of protection as to a certain average remunerating price, which the first year of deficient crop must inevitably prove not to exist. If corn can really be rendered nearly as abundant in years of scarcity as of plenty, the people at large, who are to benefit by this great blessing, should pay equally and proportionably for the means of securing it; since it would be inconsistent with every principle of justice and of policy, to procure the means of relief to the other classes of the community, in times of distress, at the expense of the agricultural interest alone.

At best, the protection conceded, amounts to a *doubtful* guarantee, in favourable seasons, of the average prices of the last six or eight years—I say doubtful, for it is by no means clear that the improvements which may be expected to take place in foreign agriculture, in consequence of the British ports being permanently thrown open, will not enable the foreigner to pour in grain at lower prices than are at present contemplated.

But, even granting that the protecting prices which have been assumed, will be maintained, it must always be kept in remembrance, that the years from which the protecting averages were calculated, have been, generally, years of abundant crops, and, at the same time, of great agricultural depression, during which, the farmer has struggled on in hopes of better prices; but, in the meantime, has been forced to curtail the comforts and general expenses of his family, and to abandon the rules of good husbandry. While, notwithstanding his most anxious exertions, and, in general, very liberal deductions of rent, he has been doomed to see any realized capital he may have possessed, gradually diminished, from his inability to meet the exigencies of the times from his annual returns.

One, of two things, must inevitably happen under the new law. Foreign corn will either be imported, or it will not; if corn be not imported, the law will be worse than useless, for it will merely operate as a discouragement to improvements in agriculture: and, if corn is imported, it is evident, that the result must be a depression below the average prices even of the last six or eight years, and, consequently, much below the price calculated on as protected; for, during those years, the home supply has been found to be nearly sufficient for the wants of the country, if we except the late importation of oats;

and the effect of a very small additional supply of any commodity, in materially depressing the market, when already full, is well known.

We have seen also, in every branch of trade, that remunerating prices by no means afford a certain guide to speculation, the spirit of which is at all times abroad. In pursuing speculation, accurate calculations of profit are seldom made; and, in all probability, frequent and large importations of foreign corn will take place, from time to time, which the necessities of the importers will, in many instances, oblige them to throw on the market below prime cost.

The consequence of all this must be a depression of the price of corn, below the present very moderate rates, which, of course, must lead to the abandonment of the inferior soils. The agricultural population will be degraded in rank, and diminished in numbers; and the great country markets, both for British manufactures and foreign productions, will be proportionably curtailed; while the agricultural labourers, who are driven out of employment, must go to swell the population of the towns, already too great.

What great national advantages are contemplated, as likely to counterbalance the serious evils arising from the depression of the agricultural interests? Cheap bread, it is said; an increase in the comforts of the labouring classes; a low rate of wages; and an extension of foreign commerce,



arising from the exchange of British manufactures for foreign corn.

I am afraid some of these advantages are incompatible with one another. If wages are lowered, in proportion to the fall in the price of corn, there is an end to any plea in favour of the labouring classes, for they would lose as much by the reduction of their wages as they would gain by the cheapness of bread; and the manufacturers would be no gainers by measures tending to depress the profits of agriculture, since any extension of foreign trade would be obtained at the expense of greatly limiting the home market.

A theory has been lately broached, to the following effect:—That those who think the free admission of foreign wheat, at all times, under a protecting duty of 5s. or 6s. a quarter, would be injurious to British Agriculture, are in a “miserable error.” “That the unbounded freedom of the Corn Trade, would have but a “very slight effect on rent.” That the loss really and actually sustained by the nation, in consequence of the present restrictions on importation, “may be fairly and moderately estimated at about twenty millions,” annually; of which, at most, one-fourth, or about five millions, go to swell the rental of the landlords—the remaining fifteen millions, “being absolutely and “totally lost to the country.” That the abo-

lition of the restrictions on importation, would be not “merely innoxious” to the landlords, but “greatly and signally beneficial to them,” in consequence of the reduction which they would thereby be enabled to make on the poor rates, and on the wages of labour, and that the nation would not benefit merely to the extent of the twenty millions a year, which are lost under the present system; but “its wealth would be augmented by the produce of the labour of all “the hands which had been set free from the “production of corn, in consequence of the abandonment of the inferior soils.” For a fourth, probably, of the agricultural labourers, would be thrown out of that employment, but “they “would be employed in some other pursuit;” “consequently, the produce of their labour would “be so much clear gain, so much of positive addition to the previous wealth and riches of the “country.”

The argument on which the reviewer rests his proof, that, by the present restrictions, the nation loses twenty millions a year, while the landlord gains only five, is this:—He estimates the consumption of the United Kingdom, at forty-eight millions of quarters, of all sorts of corn; and the difference between the prohibition, and the free trade prices, at 8s. per quarter. He then estimates the landlord's rents at one-fourth of the

gross produce, "the other three-fourths being partly cast into the ground as seed, and partly consumed by the men, horses, and cattle, employed by the farmer;" but the price of the whole is kept, it is said, artificially high, and the question is triumphantly asked, "Whether it is possible to deny, that the increased value which the restrictive system gives to the corn used as seed, and in the feeding of horses, is not absolutely and totally lost. Can it be said, that seed is more productive, when it costs 70s. or 80s. a quarter, than when it costs 50s. or 55s.; or is it really true, that the strength and swiftness of our horses are augmented, when they are made to feed on dearer corn\*?"

Now, really, this argument is almost too fallacious to require refutation; and I would have hardly thought it necessary to notice it, had it not been lately brought forward and commented on in the House of Commons, without any reply being made.

The increased expense which, it is said, the restrictive system occasions in the value of the corn used for seed, and for the consumption of the farmer's servants and cattle, is, evidently, not repaid to the farmer by any advance on the price of the corn actually so employed, because he does not sell it, or receive payment

\* Edinburgh Review, No. 84, p. 323, *et seq.*

for it in any way, except in the labour which enables him to prepare his next year's crop. The farmer must, therefore, look solely to the price of the corn which he actually sells in the market, for re-payment of *the whole cost*, be it great or small, of what he consumes.

It is evident, therefore, that if three-fourths of the gross produce "are partly cast into the ground for seed, and partly consumed by the men, horses, and cattle, employed by the farmer," the nominal value of what is so consumed, is of no consequence whatever to the rest of the community, the consumers of the remaining fourth part, who only pay for what they eat, excepting in so far as the increased expense of raising the corn consumed by the farmer, may tend to enhance the price of what is sold by him, and purchased by them. The effect of any addition to the wages of manufacturers, to enable them to pay the difference on the price of British corn, and a consequent higher price of commodities to the community, cannot evidently be taken as an additional charge, because that charge is already included in allowing for the advanced price of all corn purchased by the community, including, of course, the manufacturing classes.

But we have seen that the price of the corn sold, is raised by the restrictive system, according to the reviewer's own estimate, just 8s. per quarter; and, it consequently follows, that it is

to this extent, and to this only, that any loss which may arise to the nation, can be estimated.

It is, however, from the price of the corn sold, that the rent of arable land is wholly paid; and, therefore, any diminution in the market price of corn (the farmer's consumption remaining the same) must tell on the landlord's rent, or on the profits of the farmer, in an equal ratio with the fall, and not in the ratio of one-fourth only, as estimated by the reviewer.

And the reasoning is precisely the same, whether we take the farmer's consumption at three-fourths, or one-half the gross produce; and the landlord's rent at one-fourth, or one-sixth. The difference which the nation pays, under a system of restriction, can only be on the quantity of corn sold in the market; and the whole amount of any diminution in the price must, in the first instance, go to reduce rents and profits.

Let us now see what effect may be expected from a reduction of the poor rates, under the above-mentioned theory. The assessment for the poor, in England and Wales, varies of course from year to year; but it cannot be stated at above seven millions, on an average.

By the last returns\*, the total charge appears to have been £.6,966,156 18s., exclusive of about

\* Return to the House of Commons for the Year ending 26th March, 1826.

ninety places where the assessments are inconsiderable, and from which no returns had been made. Of that sum, £.4,795,481 16s. were charged upon the land.

Now, supposing that, by a free trade in grain, the average price of corn should be reduced one-sixth, and that the whole amount of the poor rates is at present expended in the purchase of corn (which is certainly not the case), then the saving to the landed interest in the maintenance of the poor, by a fall of one-sixth in the price of corn, would be just £.799,247 a year, which would go a short way in making up a deficiency of £.5,000,000 in rent; and, perhaps, under the new system, by which the reviewer anticipates, that about a fourth of the labouring agricultural population would be, in the first place, thrown out of employment, it is not very improbable, that in case of their not being able to get employment immediately in some other pursuit, as he takes for granted, an addition might be made to the number of the poor, which would cause the saving in the expense of maintaining those who are already on the roll, altogether to disappear.

But, it is said, there would be a great saving to the farmer in a reduction of the wages of labour, in consequence of the low price of corn; a position, which, I have endeavoured to shew, is somewhat doubtful, unless it is meant that it

would be effected by the want of employment, and extreme misery of the lower orders under the new state of things, who, in that case, would, no doubt, be glad to get work at wages moderate enough.

I would implore that branch of the Legislature, with whom it now rests, to sanction or to reject the alteration of the present law, to turn their attention to the wretched situation of some of those countries, where, according to the theories of the advocates for cheap corn, the greatest happiness and prosperity ought to be found.

On this subject, the evidence of Mr. Jacob, so often quoted in favour of a free trade, is particularly valuable.

Mr. Jacob (in his Report, page 12,) states, that, in the maritime provinces of Prussia, "a tenantry, in our sense of the term, is almost unknown."—In 1807, "the land was worked by a class of persons, in some respects slaves, and in most respects but little removed from that condition." They are now emancipated, but no favourable change is observable in their habits and condition.

*Page 19.*—"Though the rate of wages is very low, not averaging more than 5*d.* per day, yet the day labourers, who have constant employment, with a cottage, potatoe ground, and flax patch, are said to be somewhat better circumstanced than those persons who have been recently raised to that of freehold proprietors."

"The scale of living in the country corresponds with the low prices of the objects in which their labour is employed. The working class of the inhabitants, amounting, in the maritime provinces, to upwards of a million, including both those who work for daily wages, and those who cultivate their own little portions of land, cannot be compared to any class of persons in England. This large description of the inhabitants live in dwellings provided with few conveniences, on the lowest and coarsest food. Potatoes, or rye, or buck wheat, are their chief, and frequently their only food. Linen, from flax of their own growth, and wool spun by their own hands, both coarse, and both worn as long as they will hold together, furnish their dress; whilst an earthen pot that will bear fire, forms one of the most valuable articles of their furniture." "As fuel is abundant, they are warmed more by close stoves than by the shelter of their wooden or mud houses covered with shingles, which admit the piercing cold of the severe weather through abundant crevices." "If they have bees and a plot of chicory, their produce serves as a substitute for sugar and coffee; but too often these must be sent to market to raise the scanty pittance which the tax gatherer demands. Though the price of whiskey is low, yet the farm produce is still lower, and neither that, nor the bad beer which is commonly brewed, can be afforded by the peasantry as a usual drink."

*Page 22.*—"Projects were in agitation of various kinds of making woollens and cottons in manufactories, where the art of machinery was to be employed. The chief inducements to those attempts was, the low price of provision and the consequent expectation of a low rate of labour. They were, however, but attempts, and were not viewed with any very promising expectations by the persons I had any opportunity of conversing with on the subject. They seem to be rather the creatures of government, than the spontaneous issue of the deliberate calculation of capitalists seeking for beneficial modes of employing money."

*Page 23.*—"I have no reason to think, that hitherto the low price of corn has had the effect of lowering the price of manufacturing labour in any degree approaching to the depression which the products of the soil have experienced."

"In Poland, though no longer slaves, the condition of the peasants is but little practically improved by the change that has been made in their condition." "The people live in wooden huts, covered with thatch, or shingles, consisting of one room with a stove, around which the inhabitants and their cattle crowd together, and where the most disgusting kinds of filthiness are to be seen. Their common food is cabbage; potatoes, sometimes, but not generally, peas, black bread and soup, or rather gruel, without the addition of butter, or meat."

*Page 32.*—"The rent and taxes are extremely small, and certainly there can be no pressure on the energies of Poland from these burdens."

"On the crown domains, where there is freedom from taxation and an ample supply of labourers, I was informed the land actually under cultivation might be fairly stated to be worth from eight pence to fourteen pence per acre. It is, however, found, that the present rent cannot be afforded, that the hope of recovering some parts must be abandoned, and in other cases the rent can only be paid in corn."

*Page 31.*—"Among the real Poles there is no regular gradation of ranks between the noble proprietor and the wretched peasantry."

*Page 34.*—"I was assured, in so many and such various quarters, that I have no reason to doubt of the report, that almost every estate is deeply involved in debt."

Such are the effects of cheap corn, and a low rate of wages in Poland.

The evidence of Mr. Jacob is farther of great importance, as showing the miserable mode of cultivation and management of the crops, and of the transport of grain to the seaports, by which the prime cost to the merchant must at present be materially enhanced. Were the markets of England to be permanently open, even on payment of a considerable duty, it is evident that the vast improvements which may be made in these respects, would very greatly increase the quantity of grain which might

be brought to market; while, at the same time, they would tend to raise the general profits of the cultivation of the soil in Poland. The arable lands of that country are susceptible of great improvement, and are adapted, in many parts, to the introduction of the turnip husbandry; and the increased attention which is now bestowed on the breeding of sheep, and the success which attends that branch of rural economy, will, no doubt, lead to the immediate and extensive cultivation of turnips, which will afford the means of supplying manure, the deficiency of which is at present severely felt.

*Report, Page 15.*—"From the deficient stock of animals," says Mr. Jacob, "from which manure is derived, it will naturally be inferred, that the increase of grain must be very small. I was satisfied, from my own observation, and it was confirmed by the opinion of intelligent natives, that much of the land in cultivation could not yield, on the average, more than three times as much corn as the seed that had been sown." "The calculations made by the most intelligent statistical inquirers, and the most observing cultivators, have not estimated the average increase of the four kinds of grain, *viz.* Wheat, Rye, Barley, and Oats, taken together, at more than four times the seed."

"The general course of cultivation is, to fallow every third year, by ploughing three times when designed for rye, or five times if intended for wheat; and allowing the land to rest without

"any crop during the whole of the year, from one autumn to the other."

*Page 20.*—"The various implements of husbandry are quite of as low a description as the working cattle. The ploughs are ill constructed, with very little iron in them; the harrows are made of wood, without any iron even for the tines or teeth; the waggons are mere planks, laid on a frame, loose, and resting against upright stakes fixed into its sides; the cattle are attached to these instruments by ropes, without leather in any part of the harness; the use of the roller is scarcely known; and the clods, in preparing the fallow ground, are commonly broken to pieces by hand, with wooden mallets."

*Page 28.*—"In Poland, the common course of cropping is the old system of a whole year's fallow, followed by winter corn, and that by summer corn, and then a fallow again; thus one third of the land bears nothing."

*Page 29.*—"No country can be much better adapted for the breeding of sheep, than the greater part of the kingdom of Poland: whenever it is attended to with due skill, it is found to be beneficial; but the poverty of the landholders, and their want of knowledge of the advantages to be derived from that kind of live stocks, keep them from devoting their land to their propagation."

*Page 44.*—"When the corn is cut, it is left a

“ long time in sheaves in the fields, till it can be  
 “ threshed, or rather trodden out with oxen and  
 “ horses; when the separation from the chaff  
 “ and straw is effected, the grain is preserved in  
 “ excavations in the earth, till it is either called  
 “ forth by high prices, or, which frequently happens,  
 “ till it is destroyed by corn worms or other insects.”

*Page 7.*—“ There are two modes of conveying  
 “ wheat to Dantzic by the Vistula. That from  
 “ Polish Prussia, and part of the provinces of Plock,  
 “ and Massovia, which is generally of an inferior  
 “ quality, is conveyed in covered boats, with shift-  
 “ ing boards, that protect the cargo from the rain,  
 “ but not from pilfering.”

From Cracow the wheat is mostly conveyed in  
 open flats, covered with mats made of straw.

*Page 89.*—“ The wheat is thrown on the mats,  
 “ piled as high as the gunwales, and left uncovered,  
 “ exposed to all the inclemencies of the weather,  
 “ and to the pilfering of the crew. The mode of na-  
 “ vigating is necessarily very slow; and during the  
 “ progress of it, which lasts several weeks, and even  
 “ months, the rain, if any falls, soon causes the  
 “ wheat to grow, and the vessel assumes the  
 “ appearance of a floating meadow; the shooting  
 “ of the fibres soon forms a thick mat, and prevents  
 “ the rain from penetrating more than an inch or  
 “ two. The main bulk is protected by this kind  
 “ of covering, and, when that is thrown aside, is  
 “ found in tolerable condition.”

“ When the wheat arrives at Dantzic or Elbing,  
 “ all but the grown surface is thrown on the land,  
 “ spread abroad to the sun and air, and frequently  
 “ turned over, till any slight moisture it may have  
 “ imbibed is dried. If a shower of rain falls,  
 “ as well as during the night, the heaps of wheat  
 “ on the shore are thrown together in the form of  
 “ the steep roof of a house, that the rain may  
 “ run off, and are covered with a linen cloth. It  
 “ is thus a long time after the wheat has reached  
 “ Dantzic, before it is fit to be placed in the ware-  
 “ houses.”

Such is the mode of cultivation and of trans-  
 port, under which the average price of wheat sold  
 at Dantzic, during the last six years, has been  
 26s. 2d. per quarter. How far prices are likely  
 to be still further reduced, under an improved  
 system, is abundantly obvious; that there is no  
 indication, at present, of their rising, is allowed by  
 all the most intelligent merchants at Dantzic; and  
 it is with grain which has been actually sold at  
 such prices for a series of years, whether suffi-  
 ciently remunerating to the Polish cultivator or  
 not, that the British farmer is now called on to  
 compete under a moderate and uncertain pro-  
 tection.

I am aware it may be said, competition with  
 foreigners, under the provisions of the new law,  
 cannot really be formidable, since the agricultural  
 interest throughout the country, and their repre-

representatives in the House of Commons, are in general quiescent, and apparently satisfied with the protection which is to be afforded them.

To this it may be answered, in the frequently quoted words of Sir Robert Walpole, that the agricultural classes are like sheep who allow themselves to be shorn without complaint; while the manufacturers are like swine, who fill the air with their outcries if a single bristle be touched.

The agriculturists have been accustomed, ever since the peace, to hear themselves denounced as the sordid possessors of an unjust and ruinous monopoly; their fears have been worked up to the highest pitch by the mysterious silence of Ministers as to their intentions for the last two years; while, in the mean time, many indications evinced a determination on the part of Government to attack them. And there is actually, throughout a great part of the agricultural interest, at the present moment, a feeling almost of self-congratulation on their good fortune, on finding their total destruction is not contemplated, and that they are only to be *half* ruined.

Besides, I really believe, that, in very many instances, neither landlords nor tenants are aware of the injury to which they are to be exposed.

They are assured, on all hands, that the protection is as high as there is any chance of their obtaining, and that more cannot be conceded with-

out sacrificing the interests of the manufacturing classes, and of the community at large. They see the prices of corn much depressed at present—the protecting prices of wheat which are held out to them are higher than they can command just now; and they are disposed to rely on the anticipations of Government, that the prices said to be protected are, therefore, in some measure guaranteed, and may be counted on as likely to be realised.

Every person who is acquainted with the subject, is well aware, that the profits of British agriculture have been very generally and very greatly exaggerated. When the expenditure of capital, and the very heavy burdens to which land is subjected in this country, are taken into consideration, it may reasonably be doubted whether there is any branch of industry, in which profits, on an average of years, have been smaller than those of the landlords and cultivators of the soil, or in which ingenious and successful improvements have turned out less advantageous to the inventors, however much they may have benefited the public. Nay, I will take upon me to affirm, without fear of contradiction, that, notwithstanding the somewhat ominous increase in the demand for bones and rags, which has been gravely adduced in the House of Commons, as a proof of agricultural prosperity, there is not a county in Great Britain, in which the condition and capital, both of landlords and tenants, and the comforts and general situation



of the labouring peasantry, have not been perceptibly deteriorated during the last ten years.

It is said, that farmers have lived more expensively than they did fifty years ago; but is there any class of men in Great Britain, whose style of living is not improved within that time? I would challenge a comparison between the households of the farmers, and of those who fill a similar situation in society in towns; and I would ask, if, in a season of general prosperity, so great a degree of luxury is to be found in farm-houses and cottages as in the houses of master tradesmen and the more humble dwellings of the working manufacturers: and even if the result of the inquiry should shew, that a similar increase of the comforts and conveniences of life has taken place in the country as in towns, is there, I pray, any good reason, or would it be of advantage to trade, or to the revenue, or to the nation at large, that the citizens should be admitted to all the increased enjoyments attendant on the progress of civil society; while the less fortunate inhabitants of the country should be condemned to drudge on, without being allowed to participate in the improvements of modern times, to which their exertions have so largely contributed.

Again, it is said, that the avarice of the landholders induces them to adhere to their own exclusive interest at the public expense, by forcibly keeping up the price of corn. But have the

landholders, indeed, yielded nothing to the exigencies of the times; that cannot be maintained: the restoration of peace to Europe, and the resumption of the old standard of the currency, so productive of advantage to many other classes of the community, have proved no blessing to them; but, on the contrary, a source of great and increasing distress.

The landholders, along with their fellow-subjects, have been relieved from the pressure of a property-tax of ten per cent., and of other taxes amounting to perhaps five per cent. more, on their incomes: but their rentals have been curtailed in at least a double proportion, by the reduction in the price of corn; and a farther and a fearful inroad is now threatened, the ultimate effect of which may reduce the rent of land to its rate, previous to all the most important discoveries in agriculture, and to the expenditure of many millions of capital on roads, buildings, drains, utensils, and machinery, and in the improvement of the soil. Yet the landholders are stigmatised as unfeeling and avaricious, because they are opposed to further concessions; the effect of which must be, not only to render large portions of their estates nearly worthless, and to degrade many of themselves from the rank and the society of gentlemen, but also to inflict the most serious evils on millions of their dependants, and to unsettle the whole frame of society, and all those internal relations under which this

country has attained so high a pre-eminence among the nations of the earth.

It has been attempted to separate the interests of the different classes who compose the agricultural body, and to maintain, that the landlords alone would suffer, while the farmers and field labourers would, in reality, be gainers, by a reduction in the price of bread.

But heretofore, at least, the depression and the prosperity of all classes interested in the cultivation of the soil have uniformly been found to go together; and it is difficult to perceive on what principle a farther reduction in agricultural profits might be expected to produce effects totally opposite to those which we know to be actually experienced.

The first consequence of any further diminution of agricultural profits, would certainly be the abandonment of a portion of the inferior soils, to an extent greater or less, according to the reduction in the price of corn.

The cessation of tillage to any considerable extent would, of course, throw out of employment a proportionate number of hands, and the diminished extent of land to be let will necessarily increase the competition for that which is still in the market, and for the employment of field labour; for men do not easily change the nature of their occupation, or seek for new modes of life from which their former habits and experience have tended to disqualify them.

In this competition, both farmers and labourers must submit to a diminution of their profits and comforts, in order to continue their former pursuits.

But, notwithstanding their acquiescence in privation, it is evident, that if the field of employment is much circumscribed, many must relinquish their former occupations, and seek elsewhere the means of maintaining themselves and their families.

Similar effects will be witnessed in the class of landholders: of these some are possessed of very ample fortunes, and a considerable reduction of their rentals will operate no very perceptible diminution of their comforts, or even of their luxuries. But the great majority of the proprietors of the soil consists of men of moderate, or small fortunes, very many of them encumbered with heavy debts, contracted, in frequent instances, by their predecessors in favour of younger branches of their families, or in the improvement of their estates.

On these men, any material reduction of income, or of the value of their property (their debts remaining the same), would bring absolute and irretrievable destruction. They must sell their estates to satisfy the claims of their creditors, and seek the means of subsistence where they best can.

In so far as emigration would fail to provide for the destitute agriculturists, they will be found thronging the streets of our great towns, seeking

employment on any terms; and if the accession of their additional numbers should unhappily, as is too probable, increase the tendency to the overproduction of manufactured goods, and be followed by extensive and long-continued want of employment, I would ask, what source of relief is left open?

Already the experiment has been partially tried; and the introduction of the pastoral system in Scotland has displaced many of the humble agriculturists of the Highland districts, who have found refuge and relief by exchanging the free air of their native valleys for the crowded lanes of Glasgow and Paisley. Hitherto the towns have received the overcharged population of the country, where the new system has come into operation; but all the towns are now overstocked with inhabitants, and work cannot be readily provided for those whom they already contain. How, then, are the numerous peasantry, who may be driven from the extensive and populous plains of England, to be provided for?

An important question remains, which can never be decided until the experiment be actually tried—Can a sufficient supply of foreign corn be *at all times* depended on to replace the diminished production of our own soil?

During several years of the late war, when our population was much less considerable than at present, the average prices of corn attained a

height nearly double of their present quotations, from the difficulty, in those times, of procuring corn from abroad. Famine must inevitably ensue, should this state of things return upon us when unprovided with the means of encountering a deficiency of foreign supply from our own resources; and who, looking abroad to both hemispheres, and considering the never-ceasing jealousy of Britain, which is entertained in every quarter of the world, will take upon himself to say, that a similar state of things may not soon return?

If the experiment now to be attempted should fail—if the increased demand for our manufactures from abroad should fall materially short of the sanguine expectations which are, perhaps, in some quarters, entertained—and if, in consequence of foreign war, the supplies of corn from abroad should prove inadequate for the wants of our population, the situation of the country would be alarming in the highest degree.

With large tracts of land, depopulated and turned into sheep walks—with the agricultural body degraded and impoverished in their circumstances, and greatly reduced in their numbers—with our towns swelled to an enormous size, and crowded with a discontented and famishing population, what could save Britain from a sanguinary civil contest—from a fearful struggle between the rich and the poor—between military force and millions of desperate and starving rebels.

The sentiments which I have ventured to espouse, it will be said, amount to a heresy against the tenets of political economy; but on this subject the political economists themselves are at variance, and the doctrines of Mr. Malthus are widely different from those of Mr. Ricardo.

It would not become me to pronounce on the comparative merits of two such names. I shall merely observe, that the disciples of Mr. Ricardo's school deal very much in alleged immutable abstract principles, which may, perhaps, approximate to truth, and might be safely acted on, as, in time, producing beneficial results, if the relations, foreign and domestic, of any country, could be counted on as steady and permanent.

But these economists make little allowance, in their calculations, for the welfare of existing interests, however extensive, if their preservation stands in the way of the speedy accomplishment of the objects they have in view—for perpetually recurring fluctuations, in the very foundations on which all systems must rest, by the periodical breaking up of the external relations of a country, on which all the internal relations, more or less, depend—and for many other powerfully disturbing influences, which tend to confound all abstract reasoning, in which due allowance is not made for their effects.

If such considerations do not receive their due weight, we shall, in pursuit of a perfect system of

political economy, in all probability sacrifice the interests of the existing generation, and of their immediate successors, and encounter the risk of producing convulsions of credit and of property, which may involve our theories, ourselves, and our country, in one common ruin.

All the great manufactures of this country have been reared up under artificial protection. In particular, the cotton manufacture of England would never have existed, but for the encouragement it received by the prohibition of Indian goods. Yet now, the British manufacturer is able to undersell the Indian in his own market. In like manner, if agriculture is to be considered merely as the manufacture of corn, it is to be recollected that it is a manufacture, the science of which is still in its infancy, and it requires not merely a scanty and uncertain protection, but decided encouragement, to make it advance. Considering the rapid progress which agriculture made during the war, and that there is so wide a field for improvement in agricultural chemistry and mechanics, it is perhaps not going too far to anticipate, that, under a system of high protection and encouragement, the British farmer might, at no very distant period, be able to produce corn as cheap as the foreigner. But under a system of scanty and undecided protection, his spirit will be damped, and all farther improvement will languish, while the door is opened wide

to the continued over-production of manufactured goods—the great source of all the distress by which the country has been already repeatedly placed on the brink of ruin.

It is said, that the Corn Laws, as they now stand, have not worked well for the agricultural interest; that, although the farmers have possessed something equivalent to a monopoly ever since the peace (since prices have rarely touched the point at which importation has been permitted), yet their distress has been very great, from causes arising wholly within the country, and that any change from a system which has proved so injurious must be attended with advantage.

I admit, that the present Corn Laws are susceptible of improvement in several important particulars; but I am at a loss to discover how, when British agriculture is labouring under all the evils resulting from ruinous fluctuations in credit, the situation of the British agriculturist can be improved, by being called on, in addition to his other difficulties, to contend with importations of foreign corn.

Certainly, the great and general distress cannot be attributed to a high price, either of corn or of labour. May it not rather have been aggravated by those very circumstances; and if so, do we not cast away the means of recovery from the embarrassments by which the nation has been nearly

overwhelmed, and deepen and perpetuate the probabilities of their recurrence by the measures which so much eagerness is displayed to adopt.

I would also beg to advert to the injurious effects which any system tending to depress agriculture must have on the interests of Ireland.

The importation of corn from Ireland to Great Britain, has been materially increased of late years, and is now become an object of great importance, when the returns which Ireland obtains for this, one of the few commodities which she is able to export, are considered. The fine climate and soil of Ireland afford the most favourable anticipations as to the benefit to be derived from the encouragement of this trade, and, perhaps, there is no field at present open so suitable for the employment of her surplus population, and the development of her powers of active and useful industry, as the increased cultivation of her corn lands. And no event would be more unfortunate and injurious to the Irish nation, than a check, at the present moment, to a system of improved agriculture in that country, which might, ere long, tend materially to elevate the character of her peasantry, and extend its beneficial influence over the whole of that most interesting but neglected portion of the Empire.

On the whole, the new Corn Bill appears to be a hazardous experiment, made for the chance of obtaining an uncertain good at the risk of

endangering the most important interests of the country.

If this measure be carried, the principle, that agricultural prosperity is the basis of national stability and wealth, which has been steadily upheld by our greatest statesmen in former times, must be considered as virtually abandoned.

The great importance of agriculture is, no doubt, still acknowledged; and the necessity of protection, up to a certain point, is still conceded, at least in words: but the principle of admitting competition between the British and foreign agriculturist, with a view to lower the price of corn in preference to encouraging the improvement and extension of agriculture at home, will have obtained the ascendancy. The future prosperity of our country will henceforth be founded on the extension of a foreign commerce, resting on a progressive reduction of the profits derived from the cultivation of our soil; and, on the next return of a period of commercial distress, arising from over-trading (which we may too surely predict as not very distant), a farther encroachment will be made on the protection still to be afforded to British corn.

One thing is evident—the ideas and expectations of the advocates for an extended trade in foreign grain are very far from being realised by the provisions of the present measure; yet they readily and even eagerly acquiesce in its adoption, because

they feel, that, by the passing of this Bill, the principle of a free trade in foreign corn, under a fluctuating and uncertain protection to the home grower, is recognised as that on which the future policy of this country is to be founded; and the way is paved for future enactments, by which the restrictions which are at present retained may be eventually removed.

FINIS.

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