

Towards a Rural Culture

By GEORGE BOYLE

IT has become almost a habit in late years to recite the record of our failures in land settlement, look wise, and then consider the matter closed. This is all very pleasant. Unfortunately, the malice of our social problem does not guarantee that such a comatose abdication can be prolonged to any really restful degree of serenity.

The problem is not mainly one of land settlement. The problem is mainly one of rural rehabilitation, of revitalizing existing rural communities whereupon settlement, at least of farmers' sons, would come easier. It seems to me that this implies above all the creation of a spirit for rural life, like an army creates a morale prior to being able to do anything. Hind-sight gives an advantage in discerning the reasons of failure in the spurts of homesteading we took in the past. This lack of morale is one of them.

Jack Canuck gave soldiers 25-year loans at 5 per cent in 1919 to homestead and then turned on all the sirens of urbanization. It was a financial gesture without the morale and psychological support that it should have had. It cost \$108,000,000 in capital advances. With interest and running costs the bill came to \$193,000,000. (O. C. White, Soldiers' Settlement Board, in a paper to the C. S. T. A., Feb. 1941.) Of this \$62,000,000 has been paid back and another \$30,000,000 is deemed recoverable. Of the 25,000 settlers, a little over one-third have stuck to it.

Viewed at short range this looks unfavorable for land settlement, and it has been so interpreted. But it is not always clear that the interpreters examine the other horn of the dilemma. Let us look at this horn—industrial unemployment—and see what it cost us. From 1929 to '37 Canada spent \$700,000,000 on direct

relief for which nothing at all was produced. To that extent we paid people for the idleness and unproductiveness into which our mass production system had seduced them. For this amount there was not one homestead created, not one furrow turned, not one turnip grown, not one child who learned the magic of tending a new born lamb. Nor is that all the bill. Canada spent, in the same period, \$1,300,000,000 on relief work, on what may be termed made work, a great deal of which was *non-essential* and almost all of which has little or no livelihood value.

A home is an *essential*. It is the foundation cell of a nation. The best place for a home is on the land in the experience of history, in the desire of a goodly number of people. We owe it to our folk, as a patriotic duty, to deliver as many of them as possible from becoming merely "bed-occupiers in a sea of tenement houses."

A letter from a soldier in the English army recently appeared in a New York labor paper. It said the English working class this summer were better fed than they had been in all their lives, in spite of blockade. The government had required each family, when at all feasible, to work a small allotment of land. (It rather suggests that at least the malnutrition problem might be easily solved if there was the vigor to deal with it.)

Still on financial grounds—it may be asked could some of the more than two billion spent on relief have been more providently spent on evoking an agrarian spirit and its practical issue—homesteads—in this Dominion? Canada and her leaders can not be specially singled out for reproach in this matter. The procedure has been common to the democracies. The agrarian problem in England is of 150 years standing and we come honestly by many of our own mistakes. Lord Northbourne, the English farmer, has again exposed in his book, *Look to*

EDITOR'S NOTE: George Boyle is editor of the *Maritime Cooperator* in Antigonish, N. S. His recent book *Democracy's Second Chance* is reviewed in the Bookshelf of this issue.

the Land, the folly of preferring financial wealth to biological wealth, the real wealth—family, race, healthy humans, and the great organic resources, chiefly soil fertility and its issue. Ruskin had done the same long before him and was unheeded.

Throughout North America vast sums for relief were spent on public works, buildings, parks, monuments, etc. Most of this is property that does not give employment or livelihood after being built and is also under the law of depreciation. It begins to depreciate in value from the date of its origin. Land, on the other hand, when rightly used is under the law of increase and produces wealth year by year. This is what makes the farm superior to all forms of property. The soil is the medium of the organic powers, provides life employment to those chosen to bear the burden and the glory of perpetuating the race. Here are the roots of the nation—if we are to be concerned with building a nation in English-Speaking Canada, which is not discernible in a tradition that relies on trading soil fertility in world markets and fosters commercial agriculture which becomes ultimately depletive of both organic and human resources. The stuff, of which nations are built is not necessarily what makes good percentages for brokerage houses. Is it not a rural philosophy that we lack?

As between spending money to build buildings which fall down, and homesteads that should build soil and race the latter should seem to be the better of the bargain. Some of the relief in the past has had to go to rural areas, it is true. That only shows the advanced stage of our decline. I am not arguing for the rural status quo. Through commercialism our people have been trained to the non-use of materials of living all around them. The poor, it is said in effect and so enacted, should not engage in the making of things on their own farmsteads. They should be made ashamed of these things, in the designs of the mass-producers, and confine themselves to the narrow formats of what the style and the vogue dictates.

Apparently, government, religion, and education have been as if powerless against this tide.

One of the pre-conditions for the re-establishment of rural life is the revival of the homestead arts and crafts, including handicraft. Homestead arts and crafts is a vast field. There are some crafts obsolete. But there is a large field of crafts not nearly so obsolete as the people occupying the trade field with rival products would have you believe. Borsodi's School of Living is demonstrating, it would seem, that there is a considerable field of production that should never have been removed from the rural family household, *upon the cold calculations of economics alone* and disregarding the still more important cultural elan that springs from the making of things with sensitive regard for beauty, good form and taste as well as utility. Was it not in this that rural culture fell down? Take creative work away from a people and you take the heart out of them. The *habitant* stays on the land better because his mother culture has given him a sense of art, of local art, an interpretation of the local environment. The statue you see on his mantelpiece is a wood-carving of local men tapping a maple, or at work in the woods with the cross-cut saw, etc. The rug on the floor reproduces the field below the barn. Art has come to the cottage, self-respect and pride of place is not far behind. The environment has plenty of the vigor and splendour that belongs to art, many facets of originality to which is added the artist's vision—for artists are supplying models for use of the people in Quebec, the more so since the inauguration of the government sponsored craft and art revival in 1933.

Such a regional art revival is an important base of rural living and cannot be divorced from successful land settlement. It tends to create pride of place and soon permits people to provision themselves from their own acres with spirit and self-respect. Otherwise the commercial type of agriculture takes hold and the farmer is caught up in an effort to graft a town standard of living

onto a rural base. The experience of the past does not indicate that this is a type of rural life worth fostering.

An authority on rural crafts in Canada has expressed the opinion that Nova Scotia should spend a minimum of \$25,000 a year to initiate a home craft revival on a scale sufficiently impressive to make it a success. There is some good work now being done. More power to it! We should beware of the error of trying to do it on a small scale for it may then tend to lag and become discredited. The commercial angle should not be emphasized. It should be carried on as a preliminary to having farm families provision themselves as much as possible from their own surroundings.

There are some other features of Quebec's land settlement system which are radical departures from the methods followed in the past in the rest of Canada. If you ask settlers who failed under our long-term loan plans why they gave up, the majority will reply that it was the loan with its five per cent interest and the remoteness of acquiring full ownership. By the time twenty-five years has passed the settler has lost his enthusiasm and a powerful psychological force is operating against him. It's too long a time to wait for ownership.

Quebec has introduced the quick-ownership psychology through a system of bonuses and land premiums. If a settler—even those taken from relief rolls—qualifies he can become full owner of a going homestead in five years. He then has a life time of self-employment before him on a farm fully his own, as a settler in the Abitibi region told the writer this summer. This is perhaps the most important evolution in land settlements in recent years. Long-term loans can be had in Quebec but they are not advised and one gathers that they are re-

served for special circumstances, or for those who rush in where angels fear to tread. Farming has all the risks proper to the biological world and to hitch onto it a financial certainty which is what the mortgage company wants is to put a noose around the operator's neck.

More important still, perhaps, is the reward in relation to effort which the premium-for-improvement idea utilizes. Under the long term loan plan a settler could get a large loan and spend it foolishly and do little work; he could and often did load himself down with uneconomic machinery, no humane protection being given him against the liquidating devices of commercialism. Quebec of course, has much good crown land and we cannot make strict comparisons with, for example, Nova Scotia. Under the premium system the man who will not make a farmer is soon weeded out at small cost. It seems to be a good combination of psychology and the modest financial means.

There are three other plans in operation in Quebec. Two are of particular interest the the Nova Scotian: the father-to-son plan pays \$100 a year for three years to settle a son on a farm of his own; the abandoned farm plan pays \$100 a year for three years to the owner of an abandoned farm on the account of a settler who can meet the qualifications of the settlement authority. These are not loans.

But the finance of an agrarian establishment can hardly be called the more important part. In Quebec one feels the swell of a philosophy of life vitalized by moral and intellectual leaders and at some enmity with the merely material and mechanistic civilization. With this rural revival comes a little easier; without this any plan no matter how well carried out technically would likely fail.