

# **THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH CORN LAWS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649183166

The history of the English corn laws by J. S. Nicholson

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**J. S. NICHOLSON**

**THE HISTORY OF  
THE ENGLISH CORN  
LAWS**



26244

Cont.  
Sci. Sci. Series.

# The History of The English Corn Laws



BY

J. S. NICHOLSON, M.A., D.Sc.

*Professor of Political Economy in the University of Edinburgh*

AUTHOR OF "EFFECTS OF MACHINERY ON WAGES," ETC., ETC.



LONDON

SWAN SONNENSCHN & CO., LIM.

NEW YORK: CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1904

## PREFACE

THE present work is based on a set of lectures given in the University of Cambridge on the Gilbey Foundation in the May Term of 1904.

The principal object is to show that the history of the Corn Laws can only be understood as part of the general economic policy of the country. The laws affecting imports were only a part of the system of Corn Laws, and for a very long period not the most important part, though they reach back to the fifteenth century. Up to the nineteenth century, regulations affecting the internal corn trade and speculative dealings; the assize of bread; the export of corn; the conflict between arable and pasture land; the dangers of rural depopulation—all these and other questions were of much more importance than import duties. And it may be observed in passing that each of these topics has a present-day interest, though the colouring circumstances have changed;

it is only necessary to mention dealings in "futures" and "corners"; our dependence on the exports from other countries; and the shrinkage of arable land and of the supply of labour in the country.

Not only, however, do the Corn Laws cover a much wider field than is indicated by import duties, but the whole system of corn laws was part of a wider system. Conversely, the repeal of the import duties was only part of a great movement in the direction of free trade, and but for the stimulus of the potato famine, Sir Robert Peel had intended that the reduction and final repeal of the Corn Laws should take place as part of his general scheme of the reform of the Customs tariff. And this relinquishment of Customs duties was itself also associated with the abandonment of other regulations affecting trade. To take but two examples—the laws restraining combinations of labour and the development of joint-stock companies were abandoned with far-reaching consequences. It is a matter for argument whether this abandonment of regulation in trade and the coincident increase of regulation in other departments of social life may not both

## PREFACE

---

have been pushed too far. For the present, it is enough to insist that we ought not to be content with looking at each case on its own merits; no social fact can be isolated; and the best antidote to this narrowness of vision is found in the study of social and economic history. The wide interpretation given in this survey to the Corn Laws, if this position is admitted, is justified not only as historically correct, but as necessary for any practical application; nothing could be more dangerous than to appeal to historical precedents without taking into account all the circumstances of the case, and trying to discover the inner meaning of the historical precedent. Although the main object has been to treat the subject entirely in a positive historical manner, incidentally, no doubt, various popular errors and misrepresentations have been exposed; in general, however, the practical application—and there is abundant opportunity—has been left to the reader.

In preparing the lectures, I undertook a somewhat extended reading, and I have been especially indebted to the following: Dr. W. Cunningham's "Growth of English Industry and Commerce"; Tooke's "History



of Prices"; Porter's "Progress of the Nation"; Mr. A. L. Bowley's "Wages in the United Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century"; Mr. Morley's "Lives" of Gladstone and Cobden; Mr. C. S. Parker's "Life of Peel"; the pamphlets by Malthus, Ricardo, West, etc., in the great controversy on the Corn Laws and the nature of rent about 1814-15; W. Naudé's "Getreidehandelspolitik der Europäischen Staaten vom 13 bis zum 18 Jahrhundert"; G. Schanz's "Englische Handelspolitik gegen Ende des Mittelalters"; various blue-books and official publications, especially the report published in 1897 on the Customs Tariff of the United Kingdom from 1800 to 1897, with notes on the more important branches of receipt from the year 1660; the so-called fiscal Blue-Book of 1903; the report by Mr. Wilson Fox (1900) on agricultural wages and labour; the essay on the Corn Laws by MacCulloch, appended to his edition of the "Wealth of Nations"; and, needless to say, the "Wealth of Nations" itself. Mr. A. B. Clark, M.A., has kindly revised the proofs, and verified references.

J. S. NICHOLSON.

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH,  
*October, 1904.*

# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I

### THE INTERESTS OF THE CONSUMER

	PAGE
INTRODUCTORY: The Corn Laws may be studied from different points of view, and first as affecting the interests of the consumer. The earliest Corn Laws were intended to prevent the exaction of monopoly prices and to check speculation. Export of corn was regulated to secure cheapness and plenty at home; the bounty was defended on the same ground; the duties on imports were remitted or relaxed in dear years, and sometimes bounties were given on imports. Up to 1815 the Corn Laws had in fact little effect on prices, but after that year they raised to some extent the average price, and increased fluctuations beyond what would otherwise have been the case . . . . .	9

## CHAPTER II

### THE INTERESTS OF PRODUCERS

THE producers interested in the Corn Laws are the landowners, the farmers, and the labourers. In the Tudor period direct legislation was attempted to restrict sheep-farming and to promote corn-growing. From the seventeenth century the belief was general that the best sign of national progress was a rise in rent, and it was supposed that anything that raised rent increased progress. These views were held by impartial writers. Corn Laws that raised rents were also supposed to benefit the nation. At the close of the eighteenth century the interests of landlords and consumers began to be opposed, and the divergence increased till the repeal. The farmers suffered from the greater fluctuations, but there was great progress in agriculture owing to other causes. Wages were low, and especially during the great war, whilst rents rose greatly, real wages fell. The low wages can only be partly ascribed to the effect of the Corn Laws -	59
--	----

## CHAPTER III

## THE INTERESTS OF PUBLIC POLICY.

	PAGE
THE history may be studied from the point of view of the interests of the State and of general public policy. The early Corn Laws involve the same ideas as the usury laws. The power of the Crown in regulating foreign trade in corn gave rise to a constitutional struggle. Exports were encouraged to promote the mercantile marine, and in that way naval power. The revenue from the import duties was considered of secondary importance till just before the repeal. Stress was laid on the advantages of a large rural population, and of national independence as regards food supplies. The duties were essentially protective, and must be regarded as part of a wider system. The repeal was only part of the general movement towards greater freedom of trade, which began with the petition of the merchants in 1820, and was not completed till 1860. Preferences were granted to the British Colonies also as part of the general colonial policy - . . . . .	103

## CHAPTER IV

## GENERAL RESULTS

AT the time of the repeal there was much exaggeration as to the past effects of the Corn Laws on prices, and also as regards the monopolistic spirit of the landowners. Although the landowners had been the dominant political class for centuries, the greater part of the old Corn Laws had been designed in the interest of the nation as understood at the time. In the nineteenth century the only part of the system that remained effective was the protective import duties; they had become hurtful to the consumer and to trade in general, and if retained would have done still more harm. The whole history of the Corn Laws is a good example of the negative argument for Free Trade. Protection to agriculture could only be restored by reverting to old ideas which would now be still more difficult of attainment, as the conditions have become more complex.	147
---	-----