

**MOTHER EARTH: A PROPOSAL FOR
THE PERMANENT RECONSTRUCTION
OF OUR COUNTRY LIFE AND A
DESCRIPTION OF THE LAND CLUB
SCHEME**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649535552

Mother Earth: A Proposal for the Permanent Reconstruction of Our Country Life and a
Description of the Land Club Scheme by Montague Fordham & J. A. Hobson

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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MONTAGUE FORDHAM & J. A. HOBSON

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MOTHER EARTH

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A PROPOSAL FOR THE PERMANENT
RECONSTRUCTION OF OUR
COUNTRY LIFE

BY
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WITH PREFACE BY
J. A. HOBSON, M.A.

AND A DESCRIPTION OF THE LAND CLUB SCHEME



LONDON
THE OPEN ROAD PUBLISHING CO.
11 CURSITOR STREET, E.C.

1908

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deckle-edge paper and
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PREFACE

If Englishmen, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, could have foreseen that agriculture, then by far the foremost industry of the nation, was destined in a hundred years to take the sixth place among the occupations, and that by that time the growing suckage of the towns would have left less than a quarter of our people in rural life, they would have looked forward to the change with terrible forebodings. For history presents us with no example of a nation of town-dwellers divorced from life and work upon the soil, which has long maintained itself in safety and prosperity.

While this persistent migration from the country to the town has doubtless been attended by an increase of national wealth and of certain sorts of comfort and luxury, the price paid in health, character, and the more enduring sources of happiness has been incalculably great. Our dependence for no less than four-fifths of our bread supply upon foreign lands is in itself the least important factor in the case. What matters most is the damage to vitality, to stability of character, home life, and sanity of interests involved in crowding our people into large industrial cities with no fixity of work or

home, and no close contact with the resources and the beauty of their native land.

What we are making is a mass of mobile, industrial, and commercial wage-earners, absorbed in an unwholesome struggle for a slippery livelihood, with no particular attachment even to the city where they happen to reside, and with no real sense of "a stake in the country." None of the important improvements in town life, sanitary, economic, educational, and moral, which have taken place are adequate solutions. Among all thoughtful persons there is a growing conviction of the necessity of a reorganisation of agriculture and the conditions of rural life. Part of the townward movement is recognised as a normal process in our modern civilisation; a larger share of modern work requires the close contact and co-operation of large groups of workers. But it is also recognised that our system of land tenure, and other grave defects linked with it, are responsible for driving this movement to a perilous excess. When we reflect that the industry of agriculture, which in 1811 engaged more than one-third of our working population, now engages less than one-tenth, and that each census shows an increased rapidity of depletion, we cannot rest in the assurance that this is a natural product of modern division of labour.

The fact is, that nowhere in the civilised world is agriculture so destitute of the economic and moral stimuli to progress as in England. The three factors *in the "agricultural interest,"* landowner, farmer,

labourer, have been steadily drifting further apart. More and more we have a class of absentee landowners, personally ignorant of the soil excepting as a playground, and leaving the management or mismanagement of their estate to others. The ordinary tenant-farmer, depleted of capital by the long maintenance of high rents with falling agricultural prices, destitute of agricultural science and the business training required for grappling with the structure of his business and the difficulties of the market, has no sufficient hold upon the land to induce him to adapt himself to the new conditions. As for the agricultural labourer, who does the real hard work upon the land, he has a less incentive to efficiency, less hope of personal advance than any other class in the civilised world. Though his standard of material life is somewhat higher than his father's, he has gained less than any other working class from the enormous enhancement of modern wealth. In rural England he can still earn by excessive toil only just enough to support himself and bring up a family below the limit of real personal efficiency; he can make no adequate provision against sickness, unemployment, or other emergency, and after the age of sixty he slips from casual labour into the degradation of the poor-house and a pauper's grave. This is the normal condition of the labourer in large districts of southern England. This degradation is not necessary. Our land is not poor but rich, and is large enough to support in comfort and happiness a

considerable population earning its living by work upon the soil combined with other industries fitted to co-operate with agriculture. What is felt to be necessary is first to sweep away the festering remains of feudal land tenure which cumber the land, then to put the actual farmer and labourers in secure control of the land they cultivate at fixed and reasonable rents, to give them easy control of necessary capital and access to the best available knowledge of agriculture, and to enable them to sell this produce in markets where they are not the prey of acute middlemen.

For the first time some serious organised effort is being devised to secure these sane conditions of rural revival. But townsmen politicians are apt to err either by timidity or rashness in handling matters of which they have little knowledge. The result is they are driven by the pressure of land-owning interests to a tentative policy of wasteful compromise. Now, as John Stuart Mill said, "Small remedies do not produce small results; they produce no results." What is wanted is a large, bold, comprehensive, and genuinely organic reform. The conspicuous merit of this little work of Mr. Fordham is its realisation of this condition. Combining a long and thorough experience of country life with a varied business training and a close practical acquaintance with the handicrafts, the restoration of which is in some measure essential to the re-creation of rural England, he sketches in this book the varied conditions of