

**THE LIFE AND
WRITINGS OF
THOMAS R. MALTHUS**

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CHAS. R. DRYSDALE, M.D.



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PREFACE.

SINCE 1877, when the Lord Chief Justice of England in his charge to the jury pronounced the discovery of Malthus to be an irrefragable truth, a vast amount of literature has appeared upon the population question. The conclusion come to by many of the most recent writers has been in accord with that pithy expression of John Stuart Mill, where he says: "Every one has a right to live. We will suppose this granted. But no one has a right to bring children into life to be supported by other people. Whoever means to stand upon the first of these rights must renounce all pretension to the last." Mr. Cotter Morison, a distinguished writer, says, in his work entitled *The Service of Man*: "The criminality of producing children whom one has no reasonable probability of being able to keep, must in time be seen in its true light, as one of the most unsocial and selfish proceedings of which a man nowadays is capable. If only the devastating torrent of children could be arrested for a few years, it would bring untold relief." Sir William Windeyer, of New South Wales, in a judgment delivered in 1888, concerning a Malthusian work, says: "It is idle to preach to the masses the necessity of deferred marriage and of a celibate life during the heyday of passion. . . . To use and not abuse, to direct and control in its operation any God-given faculty, is the true aim of man, the true object of all morality." The Rev. Mr. Whatham, in a pamphlet entitled *Neo-Malthusianism*, says: "It becomes the duty of every thoughtful man and woman to think out some plan to stop or even check this advancing tide of desolation; and the only plan, to my thinking, that is at all workable is artificial prevention of child-birth." Professor Mantegazza, Senator of Italy, says, in his *Elements of Hygiene*, to those affected with hereditary diseases: "Love, but do not beget children." The Rev. Mr. Hawaii says, in *Winged Words*: "Overpopulation is one of the problems of the age. The old blessing of "increase and multiply," suitable for a sparsely peopled land, has become the great curse of our crowded centres." Mr. Montague Cookson says: "The limitation of the family is as much the duty of married persons as the observance of chastity is the duty of those who remain unmarried." Professor Huxley, the Bishop of Manchester, Mr. Leonard Courtney, Dr. William Ogle, and the Archbishop of Canterbury have all recently endorsed the truth of the Malthusian law of population, which, as Mr. Elley Finch has truly said, "is, in company with the Newtonian law of gravitation, the most important discovery ever made."

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23 Sackville-street, Piccadilly, London, W.
October, 1892.



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A GREAT deal has been said in Courts of Law during the last two years about the Malthusian principle of population. The Lord Chief Justice of England has pronounced that it is an irrefragable truth, and that all parties who have studied such questions know, since the days of the Rev. T. R. Malthus, that the great cause of indigence is the tendency that population has to increase faster than agriculture can furnish food. And yet we have serious doubts whether one out of a thousand of the population of the British Islands knows who Mr. Malthus was, or, indeed, whether he was a Roman, or a citizen of modern Europe, at all. It is, therefore, we are convinced, very important to let his countrymen know that Thomas Robert Malthus was an Englishman; that he was a denizen of the 19th century; and that he lived most part of his life in the neighbourhood of London.

Thomas Robert Malthus was born at the Rookery, near Dorking, in Surrey, in 1766. Those who are interested in the matter will do well to make a pilgrimage, as we have done, to the romantic birth-place of the discoverer of the law of population, the greatest (if we measure discoveries by their effect on human happiness) ever made. Malthus' father was an able man, a friend and correspondent of the noble and unfortunate J. J. Rousseau, and one of his executors. Thomas Robert was his second son, and, as a boy, evinced so much ability that his father kept him at home and superintended his education himself. The son repaid his father's care, and had awakened in him that spirit of independence and love of truth which were ever afterwards the characteristics of his mind. He had two tutors, in addition to his father, both men of genius—Richard Graves and Gilbert Wakefield—the former the author of the "Spiritual Quixote," the latter the correspondent of Fox, and well known in his day as a violent democratic writer and politician.

In 1784, when 22 years of age, T. R. Malthus went to Cambridge; and, in 1797, became a Fellow of Jesus College. After this he took orders, and for a time officiated in a small parish near his father's house, in Surrey. In 1798, appeared his first printed work, which may be seen in the British Museum. It is entitled "An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it affects the future Improvement of Society; with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, Mr. Condorcet, and other Writers."

The writer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, from whom these details of Malthus' life are taken, informs us that the book was received with some surprise, and excited considerable attention, as being an attempt to overturn the prevalent theory of political optimism, and to refute, upon philosophical principles, the speculations then so much in vogue, as to the indefinite perfectibility of human institutions. In this remarkable essay the general principle of population, which Wallace, Hume, and others had very distinctly enunciated before him, though without foreseeing the consequences that might be deduced from it, was clearly expounded; and some of the important conclusions to which it leads in regard to the probable improvement of human society were likewise stated and explained; but his illustrations were not sufficient, and he, therefore, sought in travel further confirmation of his theories.

In 1799 he visited Norway, Sweden, and Russia, and, after the peace of Amiens, France; in which countries he busily collected all the data he could bearing upon his researches. In 1815 he was appointed to the professorship of political economy and modern history at Haileybury, near London, which chair he occupied until his death in 1834, at the age of 70. He left behind him one son and one daughter. The son is, we believe, still alive, or was so a few years ago.

The account given by Mr. Malthus of the way in which he discovered the law of population is to this effect. His father, Mr. Daniel Malthus, a man of romantic and somewhat sanguine character, had espoused warmly the doctrines of the great writers Condorcet and Godwin, with respect to the perfectibility of man, to which the sound sense of the son was always opposed; and when the subject had been very frequently discussed between them, and the son had always objected to Godwin's views, on account of the tendency of population to increase faster than subsistence, he was asked by his father to put down in writing his views on this point. The result was the *Essay on Population*; and his father was so much

struck with the value of the arguments, that he recommended his son to publish it.

In the first edition of this work he principally deals with the views of Condorcet and Godwin; but on his return from the Continent, where he had collected ample materials, the state and prospects of the poor became the prominent features of the second edition, which appeared in two volumes, in 1805.

The latter years of the life of Mr. Malthus were passed in the midst of his family, in the performance of his professional and professorial duties, and in the editing of the various editions of his work and other treatises on political economy. In proportion as the views enunciated in his *Essay on Population* became known, his fame was extended. Most of the statesmen of his time, and the whole of the eminent political economists of Great Britain, adopted his opinions; and thus the way was prepared for the adoption of a better system of poor-law relief than the one which at that time was ruining England. On the Continent, too, and indeed wherever science extended, his views were adopted by the foremost writers on political economy. He was elected a member of the most eminent scientific societies abroad, such as the Institute of France and the Royal Academy of Berlin. At home, he founded the Political Economy Club and the Statistical Society.

In the other departments of the science of Political Economy Malthus was a distinguished writer. He was, in company with Dr. West, a promulgator of the theory of rent, first mooted, it seems, by a Scotchman, Dr. Anderson, a contemporary of Adam Smith. Ricardo, the eminent political economist, has acknowledged his deep obligations to Malthus, for his exposition of this theory.

The great Principle of Population has been examined carefully and accepted as a splendid discovery by the master minds of all countries since the discoverer's death in 1834. To say that it is looked upon as axiomatic by the two Mills, by Ricardo, Senior, Cairnes, Alexander Bain, Garnier, Bertillon, Fawcett, William Ellis, and William Hunter, is to say that its truth has been fully proved to the ablest thinkers on social science and on political economy that this and other European States have produced.

It was, before the days of Malthus, the almost universal belief of mankind that the wealth of a country was in proportion to its population. Statesmen, poets, and philanthropists were constant in their endeavour to secure as rapid a multiplication of the citizens as possible: and, up till the publication of his

essay—indeed, long after that event, it was the custom in many European States for the Government to give prizes to such parents as had given birth to and reared a more than averagely large family of children. Such a law, indeed, was not abrogated until about 25 years ago in Sardinia.

Mr. Malthus clearly exposed the error of such teaching. He showed that, such is the immense power of increase in the human family, it is probable that, were food plentiful enough, population might double in some fifteen years, or even less. With incredible assiduity he read and examined ancient history and the statistics of European countries and their colonies, for the confirmation of his theory. He found, for example, that after the great pestilences which had from time to time ravaged European states, the surviving population had been so well fed and housed that it had been enabled to replace the blanks left by deaths usually in a very few years—in twenty years in several instances.

Turning to the colonies of Great Britain in the United States, Malthus confirmed what the great pioneer of all progress in political economy, Adam Smith, had noted, namely, that the colonists of those States had doubled since their settlement in considerably less than twenty-five years in some cases, without taking into account any fresh immigration. In an article in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, written by Malthus, he gives most accurately the figures of the doubling of the population of the United States from the year 1790 until 1820; and shows, from statistics, that very few immigrants had arrived from Europe during this period. Making ample allowance for the contingent for such immigration, Malthus showed that, from 1790 to 1815, the population of the States had more than doubled. Hence he was led to the following expression:—“Population, when unchecked, goes on doubling every twenty-five years, or increases in a geometrical ratio.”

He next shows that the tendency of agricultural produce fit for the food of man is to increase very much more slowly than man could increase. This has been termed the “law of agricultural increase,” and is very easily understood by taking an example. Let us grant that the average quantity of wheat that can be grown at present on an acre of ground in England is thirty bushels. It would be clearly impossible to suppose that in 25 years 60 bushels per acre could be produced; in 50 years, 120 bushels, and so on. Whereas, the tendency of population to double in from 12 to 25 years is clear enough, when it is remembered that the human female commences to be capable

of reproduction at about fifteen and continues so until forty-five, in this climate. Were European women to marry as early as the Hindoo women do, there would be a possibility, if food were forthcoming, of a doubling of the population in some fifteen years or less.

Mr. Malthus closely examined the statistics of European nations when he wrote in 1805. Before the commencement of this century, he found that the time taken for doubling of the populations of Europe was often as great as some five hundred years. This remark had been anticipated by Adam Smith, who had all the materials, had he sufficiently reflected on them, to have written accurately on the Population Question, since he also was acquainted with the rapid doubling of civilised peoples, when they had been conveyed to new and fertile colonies such as the United States. Here, then, was the conclusion of Malthus, which is perfectly obvious when it is clearly stated. Whenever population, in Europe or elsewhere, fails to double itself as rapidly as it does in new countries, it must be checked in some way or other. Proceeding a little further, he adds that it must either be checked by there being fewer births or a greater number of deaths. Whatever tends to produce a smaller number of births is included by Malthus among the *preventive checks* to population: whatever leads to a greater number of deaths, among the *positive checks*.

His travels through Europe were mainly directed towards the inquiry as to what kind of check was prevalent in each European state. In ancient times, he saw that the positive checks to population had everywhere extensively prevailed. Plagues and famines, with war and infanticide, had been the checks in Greece and Rome, as now in China and Hindostan. In the Europe of his day, all of these positive checks existed, in greatly diminished proportions, indeed, but still they were far from unknown. The extreme prevalence of celibacy, however, struck him in all the civilised states of Europe which he then visited. He noticed that, in many parts of the Continent, where the death-rate was lower than elsewhere, it was the custom for the women to marry very late in life. In one canton of Switzerland, where comfort and longevity were most notable, Malthus found, on enquiry, that it was the custom for the spinners to delay their bridal day till long after the age of thirty. On the other hand, wherever marriages were early, and the birth-rate was high, he found on investigation that the death-rate was also above the average.

From this experience of his, he was led to the conclusion