

**THE VILLAGE OF  
MERROW; ITS  
PAST AND PRESENT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649729623

The Village of Merrow; Its Past and Present by Frank Johnson

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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PRINTED JUN 30 1911

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## DEDICATION

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### TO WILLIAM CHAMBERS, Esq.

Sir,—In inscribing to you the accompanying narrative, I have been guided, mainly, by the high opinion which I have ever entertained of your unremitting exertions in the diffusion of profitable knowledge. I can recall the day when the earliest of your publications for the people made its appearance. I was then in my twenty-first year, with Leith Walk and its surroundings as familiar, perhaps, to me as to yourself, which not a little enhanced the interest that I took in your adventure. From then to the present time, no observer can have failed to notice, and no candid mind but will acknowledge the giant share which it and its successors have had, not only in cultivating the taste of the public, but in awakening in those for whom they were more especially intended an ambition for still higher attainments.

Although the English agricultural labourer, in whose behalf the following pages have been written, can hardly, in the comparative darkness that still begirts him, be said to have been more than reached by your endeavours, you have been instrumental, and more so than any one I could name, by quickening the sympathy of those better circumstanced, in furnishing him, and when most needed, with friends and upholders. It would, indeed, be disheartening to suppose that labours, so fruitful elsewhere, had in one direction been entirely barren.

There is no name, moreover, it would seem, that could be here introduced with so much propriety as your own, from the circumstance that it was an account in "Things as they are in America," of the hopeless prospect of a Scottish ploughman in his old age, that determined me to write some such work as "THE VILLAGE OF

MERROW." This was many years ago. I was then living in a log house, on a farm embosomed in the woods of Lower Canada. Never were words more in place than your own, that, doubtless, the writing of it had been to me a source of pleasure on many a wearisome day. In the trials inseparable from broken health, in a new and rugged country, it has indeed been so, and it is from your sympathy therein that I am emboldened to hope that my work, now completed and revised, will be found to afford you an additional pleasure in its perusal. In the meantime, I have the satisfaction to know that my work will, with you, be under the eye of one too informed to misjudge me, and too generous not to know how to make allowance for failure in a field where so few have ventured to tread, and where very few, in so doing, would be found not to have stumbled.

With the hope that many years of health and happiness are yet in store for you,

Believe me, Sir,

With the utmost respect,

Your obedient servant,

FRANK JOHNSON.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN EDITION.

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IN the hope of meeting with support, not only in the Dominion of Canada, but also in the United States, in the publication of "THE VILLAGE OF MERROW, ITS PAST AND PRESENT," I have been encouraged by the belief that no rightly minded man can have regarded with indifference the degradation, in every way, of that exodus from Britain which, for so many years, has been inundating and polluting the shores of America.

That, long ago, the American people, I am speaking of the States, were aware of the danger that threatened them, may be gleaned from a work, published some twenty years since, entitled "Emigration in its practical application to individuals and communities." "But while," writes Mr. Burton, its author, "the States can, as it is generally said, absorb them, while they are in the meantime an advantage, in a pecuniary sense at least, to the American people, transatlantic statesmen, who look into the future, shake their heads, and fear that too large a stratum of this coarsest clay of human life is imported from our country, and deposited on theirs. They think that it comes in masses too large to be sufficiently disintegrated and dispersed among their own energetic people. The time may come when it is no economic advantage to receive them, and here is one warning to us in Britain to strain every nerve to save our own country from a succeeding race of a similarly damaged population, a warning that, disastrous as it must ever be to possess such a population within our bosom, the wretched resource of draining it off may be denied to us by the stopping of the exit." Now, no one familiar with the present condition of what in Britain are called the lower orders, will, I am sure, venture to say that, at least in one great and important body of them, of whom thousands annually emigrate to America, there has been, since the above was written, any alteration for the better. Again and again was it enforced on me, some twelve years since, by the farmers of England, that in the present agricultural labourer I should hardly recognize the man whom, of old, it was my fortune to employ, so had he morally retrograded.



Were the evil I am speaking of to be rated only by the number of those who, on landing in America, report themselves as peasants and labourers, it would appear that, comparatively, it could be but of limited extent; but they who have made it their business to look into the matter, know, that a large, very large percentage of such as on their arrival announce themselves as artisans and tradesmen owe by far the greater part of what in them is divine or otherwise, to the days when, neglected and poorly fed, it was their lot to follow their fathers into the fields.

There is never anything to be gained by refusing to look facts in the face. As a rule, this is the man that, as an agricultural labourer at least, has, for the last half century, been inundating the West, that, for generations past, has been sent out to aid in perpetuating British rule,—in establishing new kingdoms for her governance. In nine cases, to the full, of every ten, he is an ignorant, under-fed, saucy, dishonest clout.—a tippler into the bargain. Of religion he has none,—of self-reliance as little. In this last respect, the Irishman in New Brunswick, who condemned the country as one in which a man had no one to depend on but himself, may be cited as a sample. Of the tenth to be excepted from this, which some, knowing them less thoroughly than others, may be disposed to regard as too severe a condemnation, it is impossible to speak too highly; and disheartening is it to reflect on the position of men so, in every way, deserving of a better one. Did not humanity and religion equally forbid the withholding a hand from the former, despite of their unworthiness, the miserable position of this tithe, so representative of what one would hope the majority of British countrymen might be brought to become, would still be sufficient to incite even the less sanguine to stir in their behalf.

Now, there must be a cause for this,—this wholesale demoralization. Men are not physically weak without an assignable reason; as little can they be morally so. Let us see to it.

With the least possible fear of contradiction, it may be said that the oldest amongst us can recall nothing better than low wages and hard work as the unvarying lot of the English agricultural labourer. Now, is not such a condition the one most calculated to disnature and demoralize any one, the most certain to sap and destroy every tendency to religion and morality, more particularly when causes scarcely less potent contribute, as can be shown, to the same result?

At a recent ecclesiastical gathering in Montreal it was said by one of the Episcopacy, in reply to a fellow divine who had suggested that it would be cheering and encouraging to immigrants were the Church to put itself more directly in communication with them on their arrival, that he was afraid that immigrants, in general, have never been in the habit of attending churches. Never was an observation more to the point, and never, in its truthfulness, one more humiliating to an establishment of which the reverend utterer, doubtless, considered he had every reason to be proud. As far as the agricultural labourer is concerned, assuredly no insignificant item as an immigrant, he certainly is not, nor has he, for generations past, been in the habit of attending his church. Not that I would put such (his attendance) in all cases, as a test of a man's moral standing. Very far from it; but in him, the agricultural labourer, in whom, in general, little dissent, and still less philosophy withholds, be assured that something is radically wrong, both socially and politically, in his habitual absenteeism. Herein is the secret. The labourers are accustomed to look upon their minister as one leagued against them in the interest of the landowner. In their recent endeavours to elevate themselves how rare was a word in their behalf from those whose business it is to inculcate Christianity! Moreover, can any one, labourer or other, be expected to feel himself at home where, in every shape, he is made conscious of his inferiority, and where the weaknesses, follies and sins of only a class are dwelt on, to the utter ignorance of the wholesale neglect of duty so general with that class who of all should be the forwardest by their example and teachings to encourage what is good in others. Is it reasonable for those whose interests and sentiments are, at all times, identified with those of capital to calculate upon the sympathy and respect of labour? No, there is little room for surprise at their habitual absenteeism. With wages insufficient for the bare necessities of life, with endurances, in a thousand shapes, humiliating, with no moral guide that they care to listen to, with no prospect in the distance but a workhouse, is it not rather a thing to be wondered at, is it not an astounding compliment to our common nature, that, now and again a religious and sober man is still to be found in their midst. I hold myself responsible, said an old Indianapolis methodist to a Nonconformist of Brooklyn "for having every body do right by me, and if they don't do right, it is because I do not do my duty. In preaching

during your life do you take the blame upon yourself, and don't you be scolding your church, and blaming every body. It is your business to see that your folks are right." Would the thousands, at present so in every way ready to truckle to the landowner, but take these noble words to their bosoms, and carry them with them into their pulpits, the poor clod-hoppers would soon cease to require to be told who were their friends, but, with affection and reverence, they would seek them in their temples, and listen to them there as elsewhere.

But recently at the opening (in the mother country) of a block of improved industrial dwellings it was observed by a high divine that "he was quite certain that there was nothing that so interfered with that morality, which it was the business of the Municipality to guard over as the state of the homes of the poor, when those homes were such as to demoralize the occupants." Might not the reverend gentleman, with equal honour to himself, permit his philanthropy to indulge itself, at times, a little further. Would a word or two from the same source be all waste upon something of still greater importance at least to the agricultural poor, that their wages should cease to be such as to compel them, and how frequently, to drag into the fields with them even their daughters and wives! Can morality or decency be ever hoped for in homes where such a resort is a *necessity*? It would need for his reverence to make but a very limited tramp in his own Devonshire to assure himself of this.

Were the consequences of this neglect restricted to those with whom it originated, we, upon this side of the Atlantic, might be pardoned for considering that it was in no way our business to remonstrate or interfere. But whilst consequences the most fatal must result to the mother country from this continued neglect of her labourers, we, in the meantime, in America, whether of the Dominion, or of the States, are made bitterly to taste of its fruits, in a lowered standard amongst us of principle and sentiment. It is far, therefore, from being no concern of ours. I know that I am treading upon delicate ground; but what is to be found again and again in the columns of our ablest and most reliable journals but an expression of regret that, with all our advances materially and scientifically, we are yearly as a people becoming more dissolute and less trustworthy. Is it necessary to dilate upon this? I refer every one to his daily experience. Sons and grandsons, to so great an extent, of men out nightly for what they could lay