

**THE HISTORY OF THE
ENGLISH CORN LAWS.
[LONDON-1904]**

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The History of the English Corn Laws. [London-1904] by J. S. Nicholson

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J. S. NICHOLSON

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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

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.

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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
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HISTORY
OF THE
ENGLISH CORN LAWS

CHAPTER I

THE INTERESTS OF THE CONSUMER

"THE laws concerning corn," says Adam Smith, "may everywhere be compared to the laws concerning religion. The people feel themselves so much interested in what relates either to their subsistence in this life, or to their happiness in a life to come, that Government must yield to their prejudices, and, in order to preserve the public tranquillity, establish that system which they approve of. It is upon this