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# THE FARM-LABOURER SPEAKS

## LIFE IN THE AGE OF THE HORSE-PLOUGH

By H. E. BATES

**N**OW and then the countryside produces, out of complete oblivion, the genuine writer. More often it takes its interpreters from the outside world: they go back to the scenes of childhood, re-absorb, ruminate and deliver their impressions. Clare among the poets, George Sturt among prose-writers are perhaps the supreme examples of the first; such writers as Hudson, A. G. Street, Margaret Leigh and Crichton Porteous well represent the second. In Mr. Porteous's case two genuine books of country life, *Farmer's Creed* and *Teamsman*, arose out of the revolt of a young man who preferred farm-labouring to scratching on a stool in a Manchester cotton warehouse.

Mr. Porteous was under no illusion about bettering himself. Now there arrives on the scene a writer who can claim, even more than Mr. Porteous, to speak with the authentic, untouched voice of the farm-labourer. He is Mr. Fred Kitchen, a north countryman who began as a labourer and ends as one and who, with the straightforward grace and simplicity of a man using a scythe, has put down his life impressions in *Brother to the Ox* (Dent, 10s. 6d.).

### Nonconformist upbringing

Mr. Kitchen had one of those strict Nonconformist upbringings in which chapels and ash-plants are dominant influences. His father was a cowman getting seventeen shillings a week, a house, and a quart of milk a day; his mother strove hard to preserve the respectability loved by the poor and a decent seat in her son's trousers. The boy grew up in surroundings of such remote country solitude that when he moved with the family to a village of three hundred people he remembers "thinking what a mighty fine place it was." He went to school until he was twelve, and "folk said it wer' a shame a gurt lad like he bein' kep' at school" and "it wer' a scandalous shame as a lad couldn't leave school afore he wer' thirteen to help his mither."

When he finally went to work, after a childhood in which bird's-nesting, trout-tickling and field-mooching broke repeatedly the bonds of respectability, it was "on a farm as day-lad at one and threepence a day, working from six-thirty to five-thirty p.m."

### Hired at half-a-crown a week

The death of his father had already robbed him, by that time, of the chance of being "put to something"—"circumstances arose that made me a farm-labourer, and I never regret being one." As a day-lad he learned to plough: it was the great era of pride in the team, in the art of setting out the lands for the plough, in the beauty of broadcast sowing; it was the age of men and horses, of the imported Irish labourer, who came over to reap and tie, spud mangels and pick potatoes; it was the age of hired-servants and the now obsolete Statute fairs—"the Statiss"—when all hired-servants, men and women, assembled at the hiring Fairs on December 1, to be hired by old or new masters for another year. At the Statiss it was the custom, though Mr. Kitchen does not refer to it, for the labourer to display the sign



Mr. Fred Kitchen.

of his craft: the shepherd a lock of wool, the carter a whip, and so on.

At fourteen Mr. Kitchen found himself hired out at half-a-crown a week, with "boiled bacon, boiled beef, Yorkshire pudding, boiled bacon and milk." And he deplores that custom of hired-servants, ended by the Agricultural Wages Act and the Great War, bitterly—"to me it always seemed a wretched business, especially for a lad of thirteen or fourteen, to be taken like a sheep or calf to market and sold to the highest bidder."

### Full-blown waggoner

In time he rises from boy to ploughman, and then to full-blown waggoner, with almost jealous pride in his team. He works at a four-horse place, or a six-horse place; for a good gaffer or a bad gaffer. He describes these farms, their people and animals, their doings and his own actions and reactions with sturdy simplicity, a keen, tender gift of observation, a dry touch of humour. He is, like George Sturt, a natural stylist; he writes by eye, by the rare process of sharply imprinting his impressions on the page before any literary touch can spoil them.

Though, unlike him, I hate fox-hunting, his description of it is the best I ever read:—

You will know what a sight it is when the hounds come in view over the opposite hill, how the horses catch the far-away note of the horn long before the ploughman hears it, and how the splendid vision comes into view, and we loose our horses from the plough for safety and hold their heads while we watch. A thread of colour weaves through the hedge on the far-away hillside, and a smear of yellow and white spreads rapidly down the hill to a chorus of yelps. Two browns and a chestnut rise gracefully at the hedge, carrying pink coats, and canter after the hounds. A grey comes over; now two browns take the hedge abreast; another grey; a black; and now over come browns, blacks, chestnuts, and roans, and pink coats and black coats, like a charge of cavalry, and go helter-skelter across the hill-side in the wake of the hounds.

### The lyricism of the earth

Here, as in the following passage, lyricism is held down to earth by the fingers of experience and reality:—

There is something fascinating, almost evil, about the grass reaper; unlike the binder that waits for the corn to die and then reaps, it cuts through life, sweeping down the slender moon-pennies and toppling them over into long lines of swathes, desecrating beds of royal purple. It chatters its way through tangles of wild vetches, and leaves behind it long lines of trembling grass, cocksfoot, and white clover. By seven o'clock the sun gets higher and all the grasses shimmer in drops of crystal, and the lark dries his dewy wings in the sun, and in the shady wood the pigeons croon a drowsy note, and all the air is full of scents and hazy mists and humming bees.

This is a passage which Hudson might have written, and of which the Turgenev of *A Sportsman's Sketches* might not have been ashamed. In it beats the natural lyricism of common earth, and its quality is typical of the whole of this remarkably sound, lovable book. Like Hudson, Mr. Kitchen writes as the grass grows, and *Brother to the Ox* will take its place, for exact and simple beauty, with the best interpretations of the countryside.

## HISTORY IN COINS

The First Ministry of Economic Warfare:  
Sparta's Iron Currency

**H**OW many of us, gazing at collections of ancient coins, have been painfully aware of our ignorance! The labels told us that the coin was issued by this or that emperor, but beyond that we were completely in the dark. Surely those coins, if we had the requisite knowledge, would be much more interesting. And now Mr. J. G. Milne, who has been Reader in Numismatics at Oxford, has come to our rescue with a small and extremely lucid book, *Greek and Roman Coins, and the Study of History* (Methuen, 6s.).

The materials used for purposes of currency in trade at any given time and place are important in connection with the teaching of history; Athens was the one city state which had mines of a precious metal within its borders sufficiently productive to control the market; other cities had to depend on supplies from outside their territory, which involved the necessity of securing a safe transit from mine to mint.

### The Athenian policy

The vital importance to Athens of ensuring the arrival of supplies of corn is familiar, but it is not usually realized that Corinth was just as much concerned in ensuring supplies of silver. The policy of Athens in the middle of the fifth century B.C. and the strategy of the early years of the Peloponnesian War can best be explained as based on the design of cutting off supplies to Corinth of corn from the west and silver from the north. Thus there came into being a Ministry of Economic Warfare.

Mr. Milne, who is perfectly at home in every aspect of his subject, devotes some very interesting pages to the materials used for purposes of currency. Gold and pale gold (the natural alloy of gold and silver used by the Greeks and later popularly called electrum), bronze and copper were generally employed in Greece and Rome. But other metals were not altogether disdained: iron, very appropriately, continued to circulate in Sparta till the fifth century, not in the form of coins, but in bars. This was done because of the existence of local iron mines, which enabled the Spartans to depend to a smaller degree upon imports.

Lead was extensively employed in Egypt in the second and third centuries A.D. for small change, while the only tin coinage which can be regarded as a real circulating medium is that found in Gaul and Britain, dating, it seems, from the first century B.C. (It may be recalled that when Beerbohm Tree put on *Julius Caesar* his advertising manager by an oversight printed a placard with the representation of a Roman coin and the head of Caesar, underneath which was the date 55 B.C.!)

### Advertising a spa

Mr. Milne points out that coins would be restruct when a city had lost its independence and the guarantee for the specie value of its coins had vanished. Such coins might receive a new value in specie by being restruct with a new stamp of guarantee.

There are some general remarks on the subject of the artistic styles of Greek and Roman coins; here the influence of external markets was of great importance. Finally we are taken by Mr. Milne into a fascinating exposition of the types chosen for coins; just as postmarks have now for some years been used as national or local advertisements, so did the fifth-century coins of Himera, the best-known spa of Sicily, display a little Satyr standing in a bath below a jet of water flowing from a spout, under the supervision of the local nymph.

HENRY BAERLEIN.