

A Cornish Farmer in Ontario 1830-71

By JOHN ROWE

THE following letter by Charles Julyan, who had lived at Penpoll near Truro, written from Edgewater Farm, Sarawak, Grey County, Ontario, dated 7 May 1872, was printed in the *West Briton* (Truro) on 27 June 1872.

"If any farmers from Cornwall contemplate emigration, I hope nothing will induce them to go to the Western States (Kansas, Colorado, Nevada, and Nebraska), or they will certainly be sorry for it, and perhaps not have sufficient means to come to Canada afterwards. The best place is undoubtedly our North-West territory, to which a road has been opened through Canadian territory, though at present the best way of reaching that country is by railway from Toronto to Collingwood, and by steamer from thence to Duluth, then by rail to Red River, thence by team to Fort Garry. If they have then sufficient means, they may purchase a cleared farm and buildings from one of the French half-breeds, or buy a 160 acre lot, at one dollar per acre, from government. The country is not yet fully surveyed, so that, though they may select their land where they please, they must take their chance of the surveyors running their lines through it. However, that difficulty will be pretty well got over during the present season, as fifty surveying parties will commence operations as early as the season will permit, and not only Manitoba, but a hundred townships outside the limits of that province will probably be surveyed during the present year. I cannot altogether recommend our free land grants; the soil is generally good, and wheat, in favourable seasons, will ripen, but they must be exposed to late spring and early fall frosts, which prove very unfavourable to the poor settler, whose main dependence for the first year or two must be on the root crop. They are well adapted for stock and dairy farming, but this requires more capital than

most immigrants have to spare, and those who have capital will find cleared farms for sale all over the province, where they will have the advantage of good roads, and proximity to markets, churches, and schools.

"I may here remark that our schools are all free, and our common school system about the best in existence anywhere. I see no mention in your paper of cheese factories, although that system has been introduced into the best cheese-producing districts in England. The factory system is rapidly extending throughout the United States and Canada, but another and more profitable branch of dairy farming has sprung up in the United States, and will probably be introduced into Canada during the present season, *viz.*, preparing condensed milk for exportation, for which orders were last year received by the milk-condensing factories in Massachusetts and New York amounting to ten millions of pounds for China. I have not seen details of the process, but I understand it consists in bringing the milk to the boiling point twice and putting it into air-tight cans. Cannot some of the large farmers in Cornwall try this plan of condensing milk to supply the London market? It does not require so much skilled labour or capital as cheese factories, whilst it is more remunerative.

"If any of my old neighbours in Kea had found their way here last September they would have been surprised to see my vines loaded with fine grapes, and apple and pear trees, both dwarf and standard, covered with fruit. This part of the country is about the extreme northern limit of the vine, although most farmers have one or two in their gardens, but the southern part of this province is well adapted to the cultivation of the grape, and several vineyards have been planted and large quantities of grapes raised and manufactured into wine.

"It excites a smile now to think of the slow

way in which we used to reap our wheat—four hands to cut an acre a day, whilst here men will cradle from two to four acres of wheat per day, and this is but slow work when compared with the reaping machines, which are now generally used in old settled townships where the land is sufficiently clear of obstructions to admit of their being used; and as for threshing, we never hear the old English farmer's music of two flails and a cuckoo, as we have no cuckoos in this country, and flails are only used by new settlers in the bush, who have not sufficient crop to make it worth while to hire a threshing machine. These useful machines are now kept by men who travel round the country threshing for the farmers. The best are driven around by ten horse power; the owner of the machine brings four horses, most farmers have two, and then we help each other with horses and men, so that the actual cash outlay is not much. Those large farmers who have a hundred acres or more of wheat generally thresh in the field, when the grain is taken to the granary, and the straw stacked on the spot till winter, which saves barn room, as it is only new settlers, who cannot afford to build a barn at once, that ever stack their grain out of doors, or hay either, if they can help it.

"I was sorry to find by the reports in your paper that farmers to the west of Truro do not seem to have made much progress. A farmers' club ought to be formed in every parish and an agricultural college, with an experimental farm attached, in every county. Our times are progressive, and unless farmers exert themselves, they will be left hopelessly in the rear, and if the large landowners are alive to their own interest, they will give every possible assistance to encourage their tenants to adopt those improvements which tend to increase the produce of their farms, and to promote this object a purely agricultural paper should be established in every county. We have three agricultural papers published monthly in this province, and some of the best American agricultural papers circulate largely among

us. There is some difference between the great Durham oxen which may be found in this part of the country, weighing from eighteen hundred to two thousand pounds each, and sometimes more, and the comparative pygmies formerly, if not still, used in Cornwall. I may still further state that our Provincial Government has formed a college of technology in Toronto, and appropriated a sum of money for an agricultural college and an experimental farm.

"I hope, however, that our Cornish girls have not generally deteriorated since I left home, nearly forty-two years ago. Taking them on the whole as they were then, both mentally and physically, I can safely assert that I have since met with few to equal, and none to excel them."

Charles Julyan, the writer of this letter, had emigrated from Kea parish in the early thirties of the last century, when agricultural depression led to a considerable exodus of Cornish farmers to Canada and elsewhere. In 1872, an old man, he was still interested in his home county, but obviously believed that British North America offered greater opportunities to the enterprising agriculturalist who had a small capital to back him. Yet it does not seem that he received newspapers from home often enough to make him aware of the many changes that had taken place in the "old country" since he emigrated. His remarks on the farming of his youthful days are interesting, albeit the reference to "two flails and a cuckoo" is puzzling. It is probably a local term of the district between Truro and Falmouth which died out when the flail itself—often called the threshel in West Cornwall—fell into disuse. It may have meant a riddle or a fan, which were also used in threshing, or it may have been a description of the flail itself which in other parts of the West Country was called "two sticks and a thong." Or was it a back-handed slap at those midnight farmers who were still threshing when the cuckoo came again? The tone of certain other remarks made by Julyan suggests that it might well have been.

The references to Canadian agriculture in the early seventies are of interest, but it might be pointed out that long before Julyan emigrated—perhaps even before he was born—the engineer Richard Trevithick had devised steam threshing gear which worked on three Cornish estates. No one followed up this method for many years, although in 1844 Michael Harris of St Agnes, within a dozen miles of Kea, was going the rounds of farms in that vicinity with a portable threshing machine, worked by a single pony, which could thresh a thousand sheaves of wheat in an eight-hour day. The unfavourable contrast between the performance of Cornish reapers in 1830 and those in Canada in 1872 might not have been made had Julyan written some two years later. For on 2 September 1874 the *Cornish Telegraph* (Penzance) reported that “Mr Israel Vingoe of St Just (in Penwith), now over 87 years of age, has this harvest season, mowed five acres of corn. At Hendra farm he mowed an acre and half in twelve hours.” In point of fact, however, Julyan seems to have alluded to the performance of reapers rather than to that of mowers, for it seems that the scythe was not at all widely used in the corn fields of Cornwall until a later date than that of his departure to Ontario; then, too, it was quite rapidly superseded by the mowing machine.

Coming from Kea, the great plum-growing parish of Cornwall, Julyan was naturally interested in fruit-farming, but the remarks on dairy-farming are rather unexpected in 1872. Only after the onset of the great depression some years later was the dairy much stressed at Cornish agricultural meetings and in the local press; cheese-making never assumed a prominent role in Cornish husbandry, although a few farmers in one or two districts may have paid some attention to it. Milk and butter factories, of a co-operative nature, began to appear in the late eighties and early nineties.

In his emphasis on agricultural education Julyan was strikingly ahead of his time. Certainly little was done in Britain, on any considerable scale, until the present century,

although there were numerous voices calling in the wilderness. But did Charles Julyan know that an attempt to promote a Cornish agricultural college had foundered for lack of funds as far back as the agricultural depression of the late forties? Soon after the publication of this letter some local papers began special agricultural columns, the items being for the most part culled from British and also, not infrequently, from American farming periodicals. Whether they were read or heeded is, however, quite another matter. It is certain that many, even the majority of Cornish farmers, had little patience with “armchair theorizers”; hard-headedly practical, they paid little attention to writers who tried to teach them their job, and would, had they known it, have jeered at the dismal catalogue of writers from Tusser to Mechi whose attempts at practical farming ended in financial disaster.

The Oriental demand for condensed milk seems like another American ‘tall story’. Time and again local papers of the period filled out space with extracts from American papers giving details of vast wheat farms in California and Minnesota, of huge herds of cattle in Texas and Nebraska, and of various mechanical devices employed in transatlantic farming. Rather later than the time of this letter the dairying methods of American farmers received quite considerable publicity in Cornish papers. Alongside of the most up-to-date mechanical devices, however, a significant contrast was once, possibly deliberately, drawn. True, it may have been considerations of space which precluded a longer extract from the American *Dairy Farmer* in the *Cornish Telegraph* of 17 March 1881, but a practical Cornish dairy farmer might have been more interested in the “best modes of butter making that are to be found in America” than he was in the “most primitive methods in some of the remote States. In Texas and New Mexico they put the cream in a leather bag which is tied by a long raw-hide rope to the saddle of a horse, which is galloped off with a man on its back. The rider detects by a peculiar sound of the

bounding of the cream bag that butter has come on, when he draws up the bag and canters back home. In another part of the vast country the butter is obtained by packing bottles of cream in boxes and hanging these under waggons." Such methods

were unquestionably ingenious, but they left Cornish farmers in the "Old Country" more sceptical about American progress than their relations and friends who had migrated to the other side of the Atlantic.

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announces the purchase by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries of the estate of Earl Manvers at Laxton in Nottinghamshire. Laxton is the most complete (though not the only) example of the old open-field system still working at the present day. Its history has been told by C. S. and C. S. Orwin in *The Open Fields* (O.U.P., 1938), a comprehensive survey of Laxton's economy through eight centuries, which includes, in addition, a sympathetic discussion of the origin and practical advantages of the open-field system. The experience of Laxton farmers, publicized by this book, has, in fact, done much to uproot the prejudices against open-field cultivation which were so firmly implanted in the popular mind by Arthur Young and his disciples.

The history of Laxton is comparatively well documented from Domesday times onwards, but its most valuable and interesting record is a terrier and map prepared for Sir William Courten in 1635, showing all the houses, field strips, enclosures, and roads within the two parishes of Laxton and Kneesall. At that time Laxton supported a popula-

tion of about a hundred families, of whom ninety occupied holdings ranging from an acre or two up to eighty acres. Since then the meadow has been enclosed, woodland has been cleared, and parts of the open fields in outlying portions of the parish enclosed and turned into compact farms. But the large-scale parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries left Laxton untouched. It retains to this day its three open fields, its common grazings, and its manorial court.

The area taken over by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries comprises 1,758 acres, of which 750 acres lie in strips distributed among twenty-four farmers. The old three-course rotation—spring corn, fallow, winter corn—is still in operation, and is still governed by the court leet of the manor. The Ministry intends to preserve these ancient farming arrangements as an example of a farming system which once prevailed over most of England, and which, although it has now almost completely disappeared, still works to the satisfaction of Laxton's farmers.