EDITORIAL ARTICLES

Europe

"Land, Home and Nation: The Ideology and Activities of the Land and Home League, 1911-1918" by Steven Woodbridge, Kingston University

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Introduction: Defending Land and Home

In the run-up to the First World War, the issue of the 'land' in Britain, and its position and fortunes in public and national life, was very much a source of anxiety for those who felt that traditional rural communities and village home-life were in serious decline. Land ownership, inequality in land holdings, rising rents for small types of family property in villages, and exploitation of agrarian workers by greedy rural landlords, all constituted major issues, and were causes increasingly taken up by politicians at local and national levels. At the same time, and not unrelated to this putative unease over the land, there were growing concerns voiced about the nation's 'efficiency', and whether the country could maintain sufficient food cultivation and supply to a hungry home population in the event of any future war, especially if an enemy shipping blockade was imposed on the British Isles and key trade routes

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were cut.

Various parliamentarians and other worried commentators made rather flamboyant claims that the centuries-old mystical 'bonds' of the countryside, with small cottage-based home life at its core (often viewed as settled and organically harmonious arrangements that had supposedly produced the very backbone of the sturdy English 'yeoman' type of character over the centuries) were now under assault from a relentless combination of modernity, encroaching urbanism, and constant industrial change.[1] Just as the educated elites supposedly required protection from the suffocating rise of the city and its new uniform industrial masses, the 'small man' in the countryside, usually presented in cultural imagery as an agricultural worker or unskilled labourer living very simply with his family in a modest rural village home, and with only a humble cottage-garden or rented allotment to his name, also needed defending from too much social change.

As far as the 'Back to the Land' movement and other pro-countryside advocates saw it, unpretentious craftwork in the home, personal thrift, and pride in hard graft in the fields and on the soil offered the average village-dweller a better and more wholesome quality of life, one that was self-evidently superior to mere submission to commerce and the atomistic 'chaos' of rampant liberal materialism.

One fairly typical example of a defender of the 'land' was the Land and Home League, an organisation which has received little scholarly attention. In the following discussion, an outline and critical analysis of the main ideas and policies of the League will be given. In addition, in order to draw out further points about the League and its activities, a brief case study will be provided of a notably successful local branch of the organisation, one which - somewhat surprisingly perhaps - operated not in the countryside, but in the London suburbs. Moreover, in a number of ways, it sought to translate the National Land and Home League's 'national' vision of the prime importance of the 'land' into very real practice in districts one would not usually associate with the countryside.

The Politics of the 'Land'

During the period just prior to the Great War, foreboding over the 'land' and its seeming decline could sometimes unite politicians from across the political spectrum, with worries about its inhabitants, rural traditions and future often bringing political rivals together; in fact, lobbying at Westminster on these issues was frequently shared by Conservative and Liberal politicians through cooperation or via temporary alliances of convenience.

Sometimes, though, land issues led to some markedly serious internal tensions *within* the main political parties. The Liberal party, for example, saw some heated debates between 'classical' Liberals and the new Edwardian-era 'social' Liberals - in other words, between those members who welcomed the continued drive for liberal Free Trade and those who, in contrast, sought a more protectionist policy stance, with the imposition of a greater number of tariffs, measures designed to protect the nation's home markets, including agriculture.

The latter type of activists desired to somehow slow the pace of relentless industrialization, have the nation rely much less on the importation of food, and safeguard rural communities in a more considered and planned policy approach. Similar ideological tensions were also on display in the Conservative party, with classical *laissez-faire* views sitting uneasily alongside more traditional and (often aristocratic) paternalistic attitudes. More generally, the 'land' question raised all sorts of challenges for the main political parties about democracy, ownership and social justice.[2] Progressive and other politicians increasingly wrestled with the thorny challenge of land democratisation and the possible need to bring about further and more enforced re-distribution of land ownership and holdings.

In this charged political atmosphere, the question of the right to own or rent a small 'holding' of land loomed large in local and national affairs. Significantly, *The Times* newspaper reported in April, 1911, that a joint meeting of the Central Small Holdings Society, the Land Club League, and the Wiltshire Land and Home League had been held at the House of Commons in London, 'with a view to the formation of a new

society which would make a more powerful appeal to the public than a number of smaller societies, and prevent wasteful duplication of effort'.[3] This led to the foundation of what became known as the National Land and Home League, an organization which went on to play a considerable role in making the case for the greater 'unity' of the land and the home across all levels and social classes of society. In this sense, the League was not just a mere 'Back to the Land' type of organization. It evidently also wanted to restore the value and dignity (as it saw it) of the 'rural' mode of individual life back into those districts that had undergone major change (such as the outer borders of the towns) but still sat close to 'countryside' areas. League activists sought to re-inject the precious 'wisdom' of country life into the impersonal landscape of the towns and cities and, moreover, wanted to introduce such models into what they regarded as the 'soulless' suburbs.

In fact, after the outbreak of war in 1914, the Land and Home League appeared to find for itself an even grander sense of purpose: to persuade as many people as possible, including in urban and suburban areas, that small-scale land cultivation, with many more citizens being given the opportunity to own or rent land, and to gain or regain 'lost' food-growing skills and thus tend small gardens and allotments, could play an essential role in the overall British war effort, boosting the general supply of food in a situation of increased shortages and scarcity. Access to a small plot of land was seen as essential to the cultural makeup and identity of the individual, fomenting both dignity and a patriotic love of nation.

As part of this, the League's ideology and activities evolved into a determined attempt to bring small-scale 'rural' practices into the life of the city and the suburbs. Its members argued that the smallholder in urban areas could acquire new cultivation skills and, in consequence, help play an invaluable and strongly 'patriotic' role in increasing the general physical well-being of the domestic population. This, they believed, would enhance both the quality and quantity of available basic foodstuffs, and ensure the very survival of the nation in face of the relentless German U-boat campaign and the associated pressures on Allied military and

merchant shipping.

This ambitious vision of uniting the 'land' with the suburban 'home', with the objective of restoring the sanctity of the soil, and thus the 'wholeness' of the individual and his family through a great 'national effort', can be explored in more detail through a mixed methods approach. This entails analysis of texts, ideological statements, newspaper reports, official files and other forms of archival evidence. First of all, though, we must consider some of the current historiographical research on the topic and the period.

Scholarly Debates: Edwardian Society and a 'Lost' England

The pre-1914 Edwardian age, together with the years of the First World War, has often been seen by historians as a period of 'Leagues' and associations of all kinds in Britain, a time when both middle-class and newly educated working-class activists in politics, sport, culture, gender rights and many other areas of society combined in numerous and diverse Leagues, Legions, Fellowships, Societies and Associations, both in Britain and across other parts of the Dominions and Empire.

In truth, civil society in the Edwardian period was abundant with such activity. There has been considerable scholarship on what has been termed as the 'age of the Leagues', especially on those organizations on the patriotic right of the political spectrum during this period.[4] However, there is still considerable research that needs to be conducted on some of the less well-known Societies and 'League'-style movements that espoused views on countryside and rural matters, including more investigation of those Leagues whose founders were seemingly motivated by a strong concern to restore - and vigorously defend - the interests of 'the land' in a rapidly changing society, and what might be termed the 'purity' and inviolability of the countryside and small-scale rural life. There has been surprisingly little scholarship, for example, on organizations such as the National Land and Home League and other similar exponents of the 'rural' vision. This article seeks to address this lacuna in the available scholarly literature.

Why did the National Land and Home League emerge? Some important contextual clues can be found in the growth during the Edwardian period of a certain nostalgia and heartfelt longing for a more romanticised and 'rural' vision of the countryside across parts of the British Isles, an image that arguably conveyed an almost sacrosanct picture of national life that seemed, to its advocates, to be slipping away (if, indeed, it had ever really existed, which is doubtful). It constituted a colourful version of life in the home where hard-working smallholders spent much of their limited leisure time tilling the soil of their cottage gardens or rented allotments; in this vision, such tenants were poor but contented individuals who were both productive and self-sufficient when it came to the growth of food. The small cottage kitchen and garden, or rented plot of small land, through which families could supplement their inadequate wages and consume, or sell on locally, the grown products of their own hands, was seen as one of the essential foundation-stones of settled family and community life in the village, something that was being undermined or lost with the unremitting expansion of the towns and cities and the suffocating march of the monotonous suburbs.

The available historiography is helpful here. The emergence of this kind of heartfelt longing for an enchanted 'rustic' mode of life, which tended to downplay the very real rural poverty that often existed, is captured well in the historian Martin Wiener's now famous thesis, as set out in his book *English culture and the decline of the Industrial Spirit* (1981), where he argued that Edwardian society had turned away from the Victorian glorification of industrial enterprise and had become entranced by the myth of England as a pre-industrial 'Garden of Eden'.[5] In like vein, Alun Howkins, in an essay on 'The discovery of rural England' in 1986 and in his study *The Death of Rural England* (2003), argued persuasively that the origins of the still-powerful vision of 'real' English society as an idealised rural community can be traced to the period from the 1880s to 1914.[6]

Importantly, there has been some critical, if brief, attention in the historiography to the functions of allotments and smallholdings in Edwardian society, topics which (as

we shall see) were especially close to the hearts of those who ran the National Land and Home League. The historian P.J. Waller, for example, has pointed to how allotments and small-holdings 'were advocated by agriculturalists concerned about levels of rural emigration and poverty', and also by urban politicians 'alarmed about housing and employment shortages'. Edwardian land lobbyists claimed that allotments and smallholdings 'might restore the attractions of rural work', encourage personal thrift and enterprise, and 'maintain the national character and physique'. Moreover, noted Waller, sections of both radical and conservative opinion could find encouragement in such a programme: 'It might lead to the break-up of great estates and the decay of landlordism; or it might safeguard social stability by multiplying the number of proprietors'.[7]

However, as Waller rightly pointed out, the amount of land that had been released by legislation was 'insufficient to test either hypothesis, owing to the obstructions of interested parties in both local and national government; and for as many smallholding and allotments as were created, others were lost to urban building'. Thus, in Waller's trenchant estimation:

> 'Probably the imagined social benefits of the policy account for its attractiveness to the professional classes. Land-cultivation conjured up pictures of contented peasants dancing around maypoles. Certainly, the economic credentials of the policy were dubious… the ability of peasant proprietors to exceed the productivity of large tenant farmers was questionable'.[8]

More recently, the historian Paul Reedman has cogently set out how the politics of the 'land' between 1880 and 1914 played an instrumental role in shaping notions of 'Englishness' and national identity, and how the question of the land became a major conundrum for the Liberal and Conservative parties, together with the (newly emerging) Labour party.[9] In many respects, one can argue that the new National

Land and Home League created in 1911 was a typical product of this period and the types of ideas and climate discussed above, as it was founded by men who shared the desire to 'revive' and reinvigorate country life for the wider benefit (in their view) of both the individual and the nation. Yet, in hindsight, it also became something more than this: its reactionary vision of an idealized community rooted in the 'land' and numerous countryside smallholdings was altered somewhat by the advent of war, a conflict which saw the League also focus more and more of its attention on urban and suburban life.

The Foundation of the National Land and Home League

The meeting of the 'Small Holdings Movement' reported on by *The Times* in April, 1911, had been chaired by Mr. Philip Morrell, (1870-1943), formerly the Liberal party MP for Henley, who now sat for the same party as representative for Burnley. He had recently spoken in Parliament in defence of smallholders of land in Wiltshire, people who had been forced out of their cottages by local authorities engaging in compulsory purchase of land. Another Liberal Member of Parliament at the meeting, Captain Frederick Guest (1875-1937), moved a resolution which approved the formation of 'a new amalgamated society', having for its objects 'the provision of small holdings, the encouragement of co-operation and credit banks, the provision of public village halls, and other means of reviving social life and improvement of the conditions of rural labour'.[10] After the resolution was passed, it was suggested that the new body should be named the 'National Land and Home League'. Sir Horace Curzon Plunkett was nominated as the League's President, Lord O' Hagan as the treasurer, and Mr. C. Roden Buxton as secretary *pro tem*. A provisional council for the new movement was also created. The involvement of Sir Horace Plunkett (1854-1932), even if only on paper, was especially significant; he was a Unionist MP and an active agricultural reformer in Anglo-Irish affairs, with a keen interest in the creation of co-operative movements on the land.

A further report in the same newspaper two weeks later noted that, at the first

meeting of the new League's council, now called the Provisional Executive Committee, Mr. C. Roden Buxton was appointed chairman, Mrs. Edward R. Pease as the honorary secretary, and Mr. Herbert G. Carleton as assistant secretary.[11] Added to this, the following month saw these same three write to *The Times* on behalf of the League's Executive Committee, expressing their satisfaction at the government's appointment of six additional Small Holdings Commissioners, although they also complained that this was still not enough in itself, and called for more improvement of government policy concerning the land. More importantly, their letter was also an instructive, albeit brief, early statement about the League, as it also described the organisation's nature and key objectives:

> 'The National Land and Home League represents the united forces of three organizations which have lately amalgamated. It includes in its scope, besides small holdings, rural housing and education, co-operation and the improvement of village conditions more generally. We should be glad to hear from any of your readers who sympathize with these objects and would like to help the central society or to start branches in their own villages'.[12]

In June, 1911, the League, fervently in favour of better wages for agricultural labourers, issued an appeal in the press 'to those interested in rural reform for money and workers'.[13] The League described itself as 'a non-party body', and their statement also revealed that Lord Henry Cavendish-Bentinck, MP, was now the organization's President instead of Sir Horace Plunkett. Cavendish-Bentinck (1863-1931), who was the Conservative MP for Nottingham South, came from a more aristocratic 'landed gentry' type of background and had pursued a distinguished military career. Interestingly, he was more known for his ideas on municipal rather than agricultural reform, and his appointment appears to indicate there was some volatility at the top of the organization in its initial stages.

However, over the next few years, while it is very difficult to obtain reliable information on branches and actual membership numbers, the League clearly experienced some growth, with early branches appearing in a number of typical market towns across England, especially those which still had sizeable local farming communities, such as Grantham in Lincolnshire.[14] Moreover, 'Annual Reports' were issued by the League in 1911, 1912, and 1913, with a full statement of creed published in book form from their London headquarters in 1914.[15] In addition, in 1912, the League felt sufficiently confident to be able to finance the launch of a new journal, entitled *For Land and Home*. An exploration of some of the core ideas and policy themes in this journal can provide further important insights into the nature and activities of the League, including in the years after the outbreak of the First World War.

Land, Home and Garden

Published through the League's head office in John Street, London, the new journal was a predictable combination of updates on the main personnel on the League's executive, assorted articles on land-themed topics, and useful information on the growth of branches and affiliated groups. There were also fairly regular statements of ideological priorities and objectives, which can help us to build up a picture of the League's internal culture and creed .

The June, 1912, issue of *For Land and Home*, for example, offers the historian some noteworthy evidence on what the League sought to achieve and, furthermore, on the sheer scale of its ambition. A list of six 'Objects' included the 'provision of small holdings and allotments for suitable applicants', a call for 'Better housing in country districts', the 'encouragement of co-operation, co-partnership housing and credit banks', an 'improved system of rural and general education', the 'provision of public village halls and other means of reviving social life', and, lastly, the 'improvement of conditions of rural labour'.[16]

A 3-page article in the same issue, written by 'E.R.P.', looked back over the

previous four years and considered how the Small Holdings Act, despite the fact that some County Councils had 'left undone very much', had still led - as a whole - to 'real progress' being made in England. Embracing a suitably optimistic tone, the author noted how over 12,000 applicants for smallholdings 'have had their land hunger satisfied'. According to the writer, more village tradesmen and skilled workers now had a bit of land to work on in their spare time, 'something to add extra comfort to their homes, and live things to watch and tend, and to buy and sell. For all those men, women and children, life is fuller and richer than it was before'.[17]

The same issue of the League's organ also provided an update on 'Branches, Land Clubs and other Societies affiliated to the National Land and Home League', with 63 in total. Interestingly, this included branches and clubs in Counties that were not predominantly 'agricultural' in nature, such as some of the Home Counties, areas that were experiencing significant urban growth. In Surrey, for example, there were branches or affiliated clubs in Beddington, Carshalton, Caterham, Limpsfield, Merrow, Reigate, and Wimbledon.

The March, 1913, issue of *For Land and Home*, in addition to revealing that the League had now moved to a new HQ at Queen Anne's Chambers, Westminster, also furnished readers with news about the 1913 Annual meeting of the League, which had taken place at Caxton Hall in London, with delegates from 30 branches in attendance. A variety of 'land' topics were debated. Tellingly, there was also some description in the journal of the strength of feeling that some members clearly held about the superlative value and educational impact of 'gardening': a 'Mrs. Cobb' apparently spoke 'of the good effect of gardening on backward children. Boys taught gardening wanted to be gardeners instead of soldiers or sailors. It was a pity new cottages so often had insufficient gardens'.[18] Quite what the League's President, and former decorated soldier, Cavendish-Bentinck, thought about this was not recorded.

Land, Home and War

With the outbreak of war in August, 1914, the League, as with numerous other

organizations, decided to scale down its activities but not close down completely. In fact, within months of the outbreak of the Great War, the League had published a 'Special War Number' of *For Land and Home*, where the editor explained the League's stance during wartime. Reflecting on the early stages of the conflict, the journal stated:

> 'It was deemed unwise in the disturbed and pre-occupied condition of the country to hold meetings and to carry on the general propaganda of the League. Many of our Branches have suspended business, and many of our members, both in London and in the villages, are already or soon will be at the Front'.

Nevertheless, the League's Executive had still met regularly.[19] Moreover, despite the uncertain outlook and palpable sense of foreboding about the war as it slowly dragged on (initial high hopes that it would all be over by Christmas, 1914, had been quickly dashed), at the same time there were early indications that the League increasingly saw the conflict as offering a range of new opportunities to make its case for the 'land' and land-based home life. It was thus developing a new sense of 'patriotic' purpose, based on its message about the hallowed importance of cultivating soil for the health of the nation.

In an article on 'Home Grown Sugar', for example, the author counselled: 'Now the first thing we have to remember is that under present conditions we cannot produce all the food we need on our own island'. Essential foodstuffs still had to be imported, 'and a good deal of it'. The writer continued: 'In fact we import eggs, poultry, butter, fruit, vegetables and even flowers; as well as meat and corn and cheese'. In the author's estimation, there was a lesson here: 'Now it seems obvious that we should endeavour to grow at home all those products which are bulky and therefore costly to move…'. Reflecting on the real possibilities available for more home-grown produce, the author pointed to sugar as an example. On sugar, the writer argued,

there was 'no doubt' that we could grow beet in England, as our soil was 'good enough' and the beet could be grown by small holders.[20]

Six months later, in June, 1915, *For Land and Home* provided further revealing testimony of how far this emphasis on maximising the possibilities of home-grown food cultivation was now being pursued and lobbied for by the League at every opportunity. At the League's Annual meeting, which was followed by an open Public meeting, held once again at Caxton Hall in Westminster and attended by some 100 or so members and friends of the organization, various speeches were delivered, including an address by Mr. Christopher Turner on 'The War and the Land'. According to the journal:

> 'He said that the chief economic developments of the 19th century were in urban industries, and the land was neglected, but in the beginning of the present century people began once more to realise that the land was the nation's greatest asset, that a large and healthy rural population and a flourishing agriculture was essential to the well-being of the nation. The importance of food supply in war, and the cessation of party politics will lead to further consideration of land problems'.

This Annual and Public meeting also saw leading members of the League express views about how the problems of the land would be a major issue *after* the war, and how it was wise to start planning for this as soon as possible. Thus, Christopher Turner argued that: 'After the war thousands of men will desire to settle on the land, and we must devise plans for helping them before the need arises. Moreover it is essential to fill up with our own people the unoccupied areas of our overseas dominions'.[21] He also claimed that there would be 'an alien influx' into Britain's Colonies 'and the remedy would be to fill the unpeopled areas with English-speaking agriculturalists'. He suggested the creation of a government department, with colonial representatives, to organise all emigration agencies.[22]

The same gathering also saw some frustration voiced on the role of women in the nation's war effort. At one point, Dr. Lilias Hamilton, Warden of Studley College, Warwickshire (which had been founded in1903 as an educational centre aimed at middle-class women), said 'they were becoming alive to the fact that women in the country districts were not doing their full share of work on the land'.[23] In contrast, the budding efforts of some women in the city of London and its suburbs was met with more approval. To this end, the League's journal provided its readers with stirring information on how a new emphasis on uniting patriotism, the small kitchen, and the lost rural skills of general food cultivation was now spreading into the consciousness of the nation, mainly via determined individual middle-class women in a network of like-minded societies, clubs and associations.

A report was provided, for example, on 'The Patriotic Kitchen Garden Association'. It was noted that: 'A new society has been established by Mrs. Bovey, a Canadian lady now resident in London, which we think will interest our members. Its object is to encourage the cultivation of unused land, lent for the purpose, and to provide seeds, plants, etc. for the purpose'. The society also intended to promote the keeping of poultry, bees and also the bottling of fruit and vegetables, 'and to give instruction in the arts of doing these things'. The journal also recorded approvingly that Mrs. Bovey had joined the National Land and Home League.[24]

It is worth noting that the League's growing concern with land issues in a *post*-war world can be seen at other stages during the conflict, and there is evidence that the organization lobbied the government directly on these questions. The League was especially keen to ensure, for example, that soldiers who had loyally served their country were given every opportunity to return back to or settle afresh on the land, if they so wished. In August, 1918, for example, Mrs. Marjory Pease, the League's honorary secretary, penned a letter on League-headed notepaper (motto: 'For Promoting the Revival of Country Life') to the national Ministry of Reconstruction on the topic of training discharged and disabled ex-service men for the land. Pease pointed out that, 'for some time past', the League had been collecting information on

the provision of this by Local War Pensions Committees and had drawn up a detailed report by Mr. T. Hamilton Fox on the result of their investigations, a report which she included with her letter to the Ministry.

Pease also stated: 'My Committee feel very strongly that every effort should be made to encourage and facilitate the training of ex-service men for work on the land and the schemes so far prepared by Local War Pensions Committees appear to us to be very meagre and quite inadequate for dealing with the "after the War" problem'. The report by Hamilton Fox included in its concluding sections the claim that 'a very large number of the men now in the services desire on demobilization a life on the land', and he argued that it seemed 'a matter of grave importance' to establish training centres 'to give to at any rate a portion of these men the training required to secure a fair prospect of their ultimate success'.[25]

Nonetheless, the question of also finding some of these men suitable holdings of land elsewhere in the Empire remained a thorny issue. As we noted earlier, it was an ambition that had first been voiced by the League at its 1915 Annual meeting, and it continued to pursue this objective as the war evolved. Yet, by the later stages of the conflict, the National Land and Home League found itself competing for the ear of the government on this matter with other like-minded associations, particularly the British Empire Land Settlement League. Indeed, the British Empire Land Settlement League sent two separate deputations, in early and mid-1918, to press Ministers to take stronger action on the issue.

According to the Settlement League, in Britain alone, the government needed to take steps to ensure the provision of land holdings for some 750,000 men who 'had expressed a desire to settle on the land after demobilisation, and for others who might wish to do so'. Mr. Rowland Hunt, MP, speaking for the Settlement League, argued that: 'The men for whom the land was required had saved the country, and were entitled to a bit of it after the war, and it was the duty of the Government to provide it for them'. Otherwise, he warned gloomily, if the government did nothing, 'there would be a danger of very serious industrial disturbance'. The government, he

said, needed to do this for those men who wished to settle at home and those who wished to settle in the Dominions.[26]

Government Ministers trod carefully on the issue, however. While they politely listened to the National Land and Home League, and saw the organization's desire to help increase food cultivation as a good and positive message, on the issue of distributing land to ex-servicemen the government line was more circumspect. Moreover, as one government Minister, Rowland Prothero (who was President of the Board of Agriculture) pointed out in response to the rather immoderate demands of other organizations like the British Empire Land Settlement League, 'in this crowded old country you cannot put down 750,000 men on the land without displacing a large portion of the existing population'. The problem was not, he explained, an easy one.[27]

The National Land and Home League's own emphasis on 'training' men for the land in preparation for a new post-war world tied in comfortably with the League's more general philosophy about the need for the education, or 're-education', of British citizens about the benefits of land-based and countryside skills. As we observed earlier, education as a theme had been voiced originally in the 'Six Objects' of the League published in June, 1912, and it remained a major premise in League ideology and activities during the war. League activists felt this process should start with the very young, and regularly called for pupils in both rural and suburban schools to receive instruction in 'practical gardening' of all kinds.

Similarly, a series of public meetings were held for the general public on educational matters but again, while these meetings could attract some quite eminent speakers, such events tended to be predominantly for those who lived in the central London area and its surrounding boroughs. It is thus difficult to see how the League's message could genuinely reach out to and inspire people residing in the more remote rural districts of the nation. After all, many families were busy and more preoccupied with worrying about day-to-day economic survival, and whether their loved ones would return back safely from military service.

A good example of one such League meeting was a gathering organized on 'Rural Education and the War' in April, 1916, held at the Caxton Hall in Westminster, and chaired by Colonel Lord Henry Cavendish-Bentinck, the League's president. The speakers on this occasion included the Rt. Reverend Lord Bishop of Oxford, Colonel Lord Saye and Sele, and Mr. Chistopher Turner.[28] Although perfectly reasonable points were made in the speeches about the importance (as the League saw it) of countryside values, it is difficult to discern the extent to which the League's arguments were able to reach a wider audience, especially under difficult wartime conditions.

Tellingly, some of the League's more experienced adherents appeared to be aware of the League's image problem and how its critics could perhaps dismiss it as a rather narrow, elitist and predominantly London-based organization. In order to overcome the challenges involved in the dissemination of the League's fundamental 'land' message in wartime, some of the movement's leading officers began to pen regular letters to local newspapers and publications across the country in order to try and reach out both to farmers and smallholders, sometimes suggesting - in a subtle way - that the League could help create networks of like-minded pro-countryside groups.

The League's Mr. T. Hamilton-Fox, for example, wrote one such letter in June, 1916, to the *Sussex Agricultural Press* on the need for 'Rural Organisation'. He noted that there were a number of men and women 'trying to improve rural conditions, both economic and social, but the results are disappointing owing to the lack of some system of co-ordination to prevent the existing waste of time, energy, and money'. He suggested the formation of a federation of 'non-party rural betterment societies', to be called the Rural Organisation Society. Revealingly, towards the end of his letter, Hamilton-Fox noted that the Hon. Secretary of the National Land and Home League would gladly reply to any query and forward details to enquirers.[29]

On the other hand, despite the progressive-sounding emphasis on both education

and co-operation with other groups that was expounded in the League's publications and meetings, and its patent determination to play a major role in helping to spread the 'lost' skills of general food cultivation across the nation, there were also times when the mask appeared to slip from certain League members. A much more 'defensive' and (arguably) quite reactionary vision was discernible in the League's ideology and culture. Advocacy of, or nostalgia for, a more idyllic, archaic-sounding and controversial interpretation of the past appeared at certain junctures in the League's philosophical evolution. This was especially the case with some of the statements of the League's president, Lord Cavendish-Bentinck.

In March, 1917, for example, presiding at a public meeting called by the League at Westminster Central Building in London, Cavendish-Bentinck lamented on the 'isolation' of the labourer in the modern-day countryside and asserted: 'We want to make our rural districts more like what they were in mediaeval times'. In those days, he claimed, 'the people in those districts lived with common interests in a common life', and the National Land and Home League had set out to 'break up the isolation which now ruled in those parts where the labourer resided'.[30]

The League and the Fight for More Food

Further clues on the nature and possible impact of the League in some parts of the country, especially in suburban areas, can be pointed to through a brief case study of a particular branch. While food supply for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in Belgium and France was maintained relatively successfully during the early stages of the war, the Liberal Prime Minister H.H. Asquith and his government were slow to grasp that, by the second year of the struggle, food stocks for the domestic population in Britain were running dangerously low. As one historian, Wendy Tibbitts, has pointed out, the harvest of 1916 was also disappointing, and the country was soon facing a food crisis.[31]

When Lloyd George took over as Prime Minister in December, 1916, he quickly convened a War Cabinet where domestic food production was given much greater

priority. The government were also keen to avoid having to introduce food rationing, and sought to encourage the public into voluntary rationing as far as possible.[32] In May, 1917, the Board of Agriculture encouraged County War Agricultural Committees (which had been created by the government in 1915) to identify more land that could be ploughed up and cultivated by farmers for the growth of more crops. In addition, a series of directives from the government also gave the County Committees responsibility for finding more land for the use of allotments by many more ordinary citizens, in both the villages and in the towns. Indeed, as Tibbitts has noted:

> 'To increase the food supply further, people were also exhorted to grow food in their gardens and allotments. The Food Production Department suggested to County Committees that they set up a sub-committee for horticulture with the object of supplying advice, assistance and encouragement for the cultivation of allotments and small-holdings, and to organise the collecting and marketing of surplus produce'.[33]

Ironically, the Land and Home League had been voicing precisely this kind of message and a demand for urgent action since the early stages of the war. In 1915, for example, League press releases and other comments on the topic had appeared in newspapers in various parts of the country, ranging from the more rural areas of Yorkshire to the rapidly industrializing city of Birmingham.[34] Yet, with a change of Prime Minister and a greater sense of official urgency to overcome the national food crisis, the League now suddenly found that its creed and standpoint had a much more receptive audience in parish Councils or the Town Halls of local municipal and other authorities. The call for more citizens to be able to take on rented allotments and smallholdings, to appropriate unused land, and to exploit the potential of small kitchen gardens in the family home, was embraced and pursued with renewed

energy by League branches in towns and villages. The importance of being 'educated' in the skills of soil cultivation was held up by the League as a way for civilians on the Home Front to take the war directly to the 'Hun' enemy.

It is clear from a number of editions of the League's publication *For Land and Home* that one of the most successful local branches of the League, and one very determined to help boost access to allotments and smallholdings, and thus stimulate general food cultivation by the 'small man', was not - ironically - a countryside branch, but one located in the leafy south-west London suburbs of Surbiton and Kingston-on-Thames in Surrey (Surbiton was sometimes referred to as the 'Queen of the Suburbs'). A brief case study of the branch can help illustrate this suburban dimension to the League and round off our discussion.

Evidence of the emergence of the League in this very middle-class and suburban area during the Great War can be detected as early as January, 1915, when a 'Mr. Dean' wrote to the local authorities in Kingston on behalf of the 'Surbiton and Kingston' branch of the League. He thanked the Properties Committee of the Town Council for the provision of some new allotments in Kingston.[36] However, a more organized and expanded presence for the League in the area can be seen with the appearance of a 'Norbiton Branch' in the Norbiton area of the town shortly afterwards, and the full inauguration of a 'Kingston branch' a few months later in May, 1915.[37] Members of the new Kingston branch included some local elected Councillors, who appeared to see no conflict of interest between their own positions as sitting members of the Town Council and membership of an independent local lobby group: 'During the course of the evening Councillor Beebe gave a number of particulars concerning the allotment and small holding movement, and pointed out the benefits to be derived from it'.[37]

Over the course of the next 2-3 years, the Surbiton, Norbiton and Kingston branches of the League effectively became one large single branch in the area (often called the 'Norbiton branch'), and managed to generate considerable and regular publicity concerning their campaign for the creation of many more allotments for food

cultivation in the Kingston area. In fact, the commitment and energy of local officers of the branch (especially its chairman, Mr. J.A. Marshall) served to ensure that the local *Surrey Comet* newspaper carried news about the League and its local activities on a near-weekly basis. Moreover, many of the objectives pursued by the League at national level were on full display in the local Kingston branch, despite some resistance and a somewhat resentful attitude on the part of some members of the local authority to the League's intense lobbying efforts in the area.

In addition to its own monthly branch meetings for members, the branch began to organise open public meetings on 'land' issues, such as one held in Kingston Market Place (in the heart of the town) in October, 1916, where a resolution was passed that called for Kingston Corporation to provide more permanent allotments, not just extra temporary rented ones.[38] The implication of this was clearly that the League believed that the wartime rental of new allotments or smallholdings by individuals should be replaced with eventual *permanent* ownership of that land, an assertion that undoubtedly undermined the League's frequent claims to be a 'non-political' organisation.

By December, 1916, the local Council had (rather grudgingly, it seems) come round to the view that it could delegate some responsibility to the League for both identifying potential new areas of land for food cultivation in Kingston and also to playing a key role in the 'training' of new allotment holders in essential gardening skills. Interestingly, by the end of the same month, the local press had also become notably open in its praise of the League in the Kingston area, and an editorial in the *Surrey Comet* reminded its readers that 'the association… has been actively engaged during the past twelve or eighteen months in obtaining garden ground for its members, and is able to show fully one hundred and ninety garden plots of various sizes now under cultivation'. The newspaper declared that 'good returns' could be obtained by all who came forward 'in the national interest' to 'take a hand in this important movement'.[39] This was high praise indeed.

Above all, investigation of the League at this local suburban level can help illustrate

how the organization more generally envisaged a ‘new Britain’ based on the restoration of the importance of the ‘land’ in national consciousness and, in particular, the creation of a harmonious synthesis of the ‘land’ and the ‘home’. In October, 1917, for example, Mr. Peter Wilson Raffan, the Liberal MP for Leigh in Lancashire (a mainly agricultural town near Wigan), was invited down to Kingston by the League to distribute special prizes to the local allotment holders for their cultivation of the many new ‘war food plots’ of the Borough.

In a passionate speech, Wilson Raffan told League members that, while the brave men at the Front were ‘facing danger and death daily for our sakes’, it was the duty of those at home to see that they neglected no effort which would support the soldiers in their task, and help bring the nation to triumph: ‘Of all the national efforts, he was sure none could be of greater importance at the present time than that of stimulating food production’. Significantly, the speaker went on to say that ‘while the present work was going on they required to think ahead of the war’. They in the League, he said, were keeping in mind ‘the necessity of developing the great natural resources of the country and more particularly the land of the country. It would be equally essential that when men came back they should see this land for which they had fought so gallantly should no longer be treated as the preserve of the few but as a storehouse of the people’.

Adding further detail to his vision of an unspoiled post-war future, he added that the ‘ideal system would be that instead of having a house at one place and allotment at another, they should so arrange matters that a house should have a sufficient piece of garden to enable a man to do without having an allotment’. He beseeched them as ‘plot holders’ and as citizens to do some thinking as to how ‘the problems associated with the land were to be faced in the future’.[40]

Conclusion: Land, Home and Myth

The preceding discussion and critical evaluation of the Land and Home League has fulfilled two functions. Firstly, it has enabled us to re-visit and consider the nature

and impact of an organisation that has been relatively neglected by scholars, a movement that, although not large, was arguably a good example of the veritable 'explosion' in the growth of Leagues and other kindred groups and associations in both the Edwardian and First World War periods.

Secondly, the discussion has tried to pin down and capture the essence of some of the core ideas, culture and policies of the League while, at the same time, subjecting them to necessary critical scrutiny. It was noted how the League was motivated, fundamentally, by an overriding desire to somehow defend the 'land' in all its forms and reconnect the land with the 'home', but also how this creed was, at the best of times, quite obtuse and often contained glaring contradictions. The League's stance was, in fact, a curious medley - an uneasy blend of the old and the new.

Indeed, in many ways, the League's creed contained palpable tensions between its forward-looking, radical ambitions (on education, land democratization and redistribution, better housing, and so on), and the continuing adherence of some members to a rather backward-looking, antiquated and hopelessly mythologised vision of the past, one that was rooted in and shaped by a rural and harmonious England that never really existed in historical reality. Moreover, the League's claims that it was a 'non-political' movement should also be treated with caution. Self-evidently, political views and attitudes ran steadfastly through the National Land and Home League's, both in its creed and its activities.

Finally, given that the League placed so much faith in the 'land' and in the supposed rural wisdom of village life, it seems ironic that - in hindsight - the organisation's impact was patchy and weak in most parts of the countryside where it appeared. It remained a largely metropolitan, city-based movement, which saw some of its most successful activities occur in a chiefly suburban environment.

Notes

1. A good survey of such 'new growths' is contained in P.J. Waller: *Town, City and Nation*: *England 1850-1914* (1983) (1999 ed.), chapt. 4, pp.127-184. Fears about these changes voiced by the intellectual elites in Britain are analysed very

effectively in John Carey: *The Intellectuals and the Masses*: *Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (1992).

2. For a useful discussion of this in relation to the Liberal party, see Ian Packer: *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land*: *The Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906-1914* (2001). On some of the land and property dilemmas faced by the Conservative party, see Ewen Henry Harvey Green: *The Crisis of Conservatism*: *The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the Conservative party, 1880-1914* (1995).

3. 'The Small Holdings Movement', *The Times*, April 6th, 1911, p.6.

4. See, for example, Geoffrey Searle: 'Critics of Edwardian Society', in: Alan O'Day (ed.): *The Edwardian Age* (1979); Alan Sykes: 'The radical right and the crisis of Conservatism', *Historical Journal*, vol. XXVI (1983), pp.661-76; Alan Sykes: *The Radical Right in Britain* (2005), chapt. 1.

5. Martin J. Wiener: *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (1981) (new ed., 1992).

6. Alun Howkins: 'The discovery of rural England', in: R. Colls and P. Dodd (eds.): *Englishness*: *Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (1986), pp.62-88; Alun Howkins: *The Death of Rural England*: *A social history of the countryside since 1900* (2003), chapt. 1.

7. Waller: *Town, City and Nation*, p.190.

8. Waller: *Town, City and Nation*, pp.190-91.

9. Paul Reedman: *Land and Nation in England*: *Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of the Land, 1880-1914* (2008).

10. *The Times*, April 6th, 1911, p.6.

11. 'National Land and Home League', *The Times*, April 22nd, 1911, p.6.

12. 'The Revival of Country Life', *The Times*, May 26th, 1911, p.17.

13. 'The Revival of Country Life', *The Times*, June 6th, 1911, p.6.

14. *Grantham Journal*, December 2nd, 1911, p.2.

15. *Objects of the League* (National Land and Home League, London, 1914).

16. 'Objects'. Inside front cover, *For Land and Home*, June, 1912.

17. 'Four Years of Progress', *For Land and Home*, June, 1912, pp.1-3.

18. *For Land and Home*, March, 1913, p.2.

19. 'The League and the War', *For Land and Home*, January, 1915, p.1.

20. 'Home Grown Sugar', *For Land and Home*, January, 1915, pp.2-5.

21. 'The Public Meeting', *For Land and Home*, June, 1915, pp.2-3.

22. 'Women and Agriculture - The Peopling of the Spacious Colonies', *The Times*, April 15th, 1915, p.7.

23. Ibid, p.7.

24. 'The Patriotic Kitchen Garden Association', *For Land and Home*, June, 1915, p.7. A number of other women from similar class backgrounds were also keen advocates of the role that could be played in the war effort by 'Kitchen Gardens'. See, for example, a detailed letter from Rose T. Patry, of Hampstead in London, published in the *Surrey Comet*, August 11th, 1915, p.5.

25. Ministry of Reconstruction: 'Inquiry by the National Land and Home League on Training of Discharged and Disabled Ex-Service Men for Work on the Land', TNA RECO 1/704 (August, 1918), The National Archives (TNA), Kew.

26. 'Note of Proceedings at a Deputation from the British Empire Land Settlement League received by Rt. Hon. R.E. Prothero, MP, on Wednesday 23rd January, 1918', TNA T172/848/60-68 (1918), The National Archives, Kew.

27. 'Mr. Prothero's reply to a Deputation from the British Empire Land Settlement League, received by him on Wednesday, 5th June, 1918', TNA T172/848/49-52 (1918), The National Archives, Kew.

28. 'Rural Education and the War', *Common Cause*, March 31st, 1916, p.6.

29. 'Rural Organisation', letter from T. Hamilton Fox in the *Sussex Agricultural Express*, June 23rd, 1916, p.2.

30. 'The Isolation of the Labourer', *Banbury Guardian*, March 29th, 1917, p.2.

31. See Wendy Tibbitts: 'The 1917-1918 food crisis: How the Middlesex War Agricultural Committee responded', *The Local Historian*, vol.48, no.3 (July, 2018), pp.194-207.

32. Ibid, p.196.

33. Ibid, p.200.

34. See, for example: 'Allotments and Food Supply in War', *Yorkshire Post and Intelligencer*, November 19th, 1915, p.3; 'Allotment Land', *Birmingham Daily Post*, November 20th, 1915, p.10.

35. See, for example, *For Land and Home*, January, 1915, p.10, and June, 1915, p.8.

36. 'Progress with the Provision of Allotments', *Surrey Comet*, January 27th, 1915, p.7.

37. 'National Land and Home League - Inauguration of a Kingston Branch', *Surrey Comet*, May 12th, 1915, p.7.

38. 'Demand for Additional Allotments', *Surrey Comet*, October 14th, 1916, p.8.

39. 'War Food Gardens' (editorial), *Surrey Comet*, December 20th, 1916, p.6.

40. 'War Food Plots', *Surrey Comet*, October 31st, 1917, p.2.