

A British View Of Indiana's Agriculture, 1879

*Edited by Lowell H. Harrison**

By the close of the 1870s British agriculture, which had recently enjoyed a period of almost unparalleled prosperity, was rapidly approaching a state of crisis. Many of the causes were local, but a major factor was the increased competition from Canada and the United States.¹ An Agricultural Interests Commission was appointed by the House of Commons to survey the entire problem in an effort to discover possible legislative solutions, and two members of Parliament, Mr. Claire Read and Mr. Albert Pell, were sent to America to investigate the competition at first hand.²

The commissioners were, according to Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, "two great ornaments of the farming class in this country."³ Read (1826-1905), a member of a prominent Norfolk farming family, was successfully managing large properties before reaching his majority. Elected to the House of Commons in 1865 as a Tory, he held his seat until 1880 when he was defeated by a single vote. Read sat in the House again in 1884-1885 but was an unsuccessful candidate in 1886. His major concern in the House was agricultural affairs, and during his tenure he served on almost every important agricultural committee. Read wrote several prize essays on agriculture, and he worked actively in various agricultural societies. Appointed parliamentary secretary to the Local Government Board in February, 1874, he resigned two years later when the government refused to extend to Ireland the provisions of the Cattle Diseases Act. In appreciation of his many services English farmers presented him with a silver salver and a purse of £5500.⁴ Claire Read was an obvious choice for the investigation of American agriculture.

His colleague, Mr. Albert Pell (1820-1907), was also a distinguished agriculturalist. Pell's father was a lawyer and a judge, and Pell was destined for the bar until he succumbed to his love for

*Lowell H. Harrison is professor of history, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green.

¹A contemporary description of the problem is "The Plight of the English Farmer," *The Nation*, XXVIII (March 27, 1879), 212-13. The classic survey of British agriculture, updated with critical and bibliographical introductory essays, is Rowland E. P. Ernle, *English Farming, Past and Present* (6th ed., London, 1961, reprinted 1968).

²"Joint Report of Mr. Claire Read and Mr. Albert Pell, M.P.," *Reports of the Assistant Commissioners: Agricultural Interests Commission*, in House of Commons, *British Sessional Papers* (1880), XVIII, No. 1. Their notes are printed as an appendix to their formal report.

³Fargo (N. D.) *Times*, October 11, 1879, quoted in Bertha L. Heilbron, "A British Agricultural Expert in the Red River Valley, 1879," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, VII (January-April, 1933), 94n.

⁴Sir Sidney Lee, ed., *The Dictionary of National Biography, Supplement 1901-1911* (3 vols., London, 1912), III, 168-69.

country life. He farmed quietly and efficiently until 1865 when his indignant demands for action to combat the cattle plague brought him to the public's attention. Elected to the House of Commons three years later, he served in that body until his retirement in 1885. Though politically a Tory, Pell was considered radical in several areas in which he sought reforms. His particular interests included the poor law, county government, local taxation, social reform, and agricultural improvements. Pell was active in writing and teaching about agriculture following his retirement from the House.⁵

The British commissioners saw Indiana's agriculture in an especially good year. An agricultural revolution had been wrought within the generation by better transportation outlets, improved farming techniques, and increased use of machinery.⁶ The acres devoted to corn had increased from 2,627,980 in 1872 to 3,517,808 in 1879, although the yield per acre had remained almost constant at 32-33 bushels per acre. But the production of wheat had soared from 1,902,599 acres in 1872 to 2,422,480 acres in 1879, and the 1879 yield of 20.3 bushels far exceeded the decade's average of 12.9. The number of cattle had declined from 1,211,246 in 1872 to 1,065,143 in 1879, but by the latter year Indiana breeders were convinced that they were at last producing cattle equal to those found anywhere in the country.⁷ Although obviously swayed by local pride, the 1879 Putnam County agricultural report asserted that "Putnam County can produce as fine herds of Short Horns as any place," and the Vermillion County report stated flatly that "The cattle were the best ever exhibited at our fair." Both counties also reported exceptionally good wheat crops, although corn yields were somewhat disappointing.⁸

Read and Pell landed at New York on September 7, 1879, and sailed for home just over three months later. During their crowded stay they covered some 9,400 miles in their effort to obtain information on American agriculture. Two weeks were spent in Canada; the rest of the time they crisscrossed the United States.⁹ In early November the commissioners spent a few days in Indiana, chiefly in Indianapolis and the western portion of the state, before going on to Kentucky. The brief field notes of Read and Pell do not, of course, present a comprehensive view of Indiana agriculture, but the notes do give an interesting glimpse of the state's agriculture as it caught the attention of expert visitors in 1879.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁶ Dr. R. T. Brown, "Review of Agriculture in Indiana," *Annual Report of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture, 1880* (Indianapolis, 1881), 217-19. A general account of Indiana agriculture in the period 1850-1880 can be found in Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880* (Indianapolis, 1965), 362-403.

⁷ *Annual Report of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture, 1879* (Indianapolis, 1879), 276, 278; *Annual Report, 1880*, 343.

⁸ *Annual Report, 1879*, 336, 345.

⁹ "Joint Report of Read and Pell," 3.

Report of Read and Pell¹

INDIANAPOLIS, Nov. 12.

A weather chart is suspended in the room of the Board of Trade in Indianapolis.² It is large and on canvas, with contour lines, and the points of observations, called stations, named in red. Moveable discs about the size of a farthing are daily attached near the stations, *red* for fine, *blue* for cloudy, *half blue, half white*, for cloud and rain, *white* for rain, *black and white stripes* for snow. Adjustable cardboard arrows on the map next each station indicate the direction of the wind, and slips of manuscript appended show the records of barometer and thermometer and the rainfall in inches.

The farm of Mr. Oliver Johnson,³ Walnut Grove, 3 miles from Indianapolis, consists of 160 acres; 40 acres wheat, 40 maize, 20 oats and seeds, 60 wood and grazing land. The stock are 6 horses, 30 horned cattle, and 30 sheep. The land is manured regularly, the dung being put on the seeds, and on wheat after wheat, and this practice, Mr. Johnson says, will have to be followed if the fertility of the land is to be maintained. The average crop of wheat is 13 to 15 bushels, and the average price 1 dollar, or 33s. 4d. a quarter of 480 lbs.; of corn, 30 bushels, at an average price of 40 cents or 1s. 8d., or 13s. 4d. the quarter of 448 lbs. A man and a pair of horses will prepare the land, and sow and cultivate 20 acres of corn (maize). It is well to "cultivate" this crop five times, till the tassel is out. The yield depends on cultivation more than on season.

The wheat is cut in the last week of June or the first week of July. Two regular hands cost 18 dollars a month, with bed and board. The price of an extra man in busy times is 1 dollar to 1 dollar 50 cents a day, with bed and board. For three winter months, only one hand is required. The men then out of place may, and do in some cases, even

¹ The document which follows is a transcription of a photographic copy of the field notes contained in the appendix to the "Joint Report of Mr. Claire Read and Mr. Albert Pell, M.P.," *Reports of the Assistant Commissioners: Agricultural Interests Commission*, in House of Commons, British Sessional Papers (1880), XVIII, No. 1. The only change from the original is the omission of marginal subject headings. Monetary conversions included are those of the original document.

² The Board of Trade Building measured 60 by 145 feet and was approximately 40 feet high. Its formal dedication had been on December 15, 1874. Indianapolis Board of Trade, *Annual Report of the Trade & Commerce of Indianapolis, 1879*, comp., Henry C. Wilson (Indianapolis, 1880), cover picture and descriptions.

³ Oliver Johnson was born in Franklin County in 1821, but his family moved to Marion County when he was just a child. His agricultural reputation was excellent. *Commemorative Biographical Record of Prominent and Representative Men of Indianapolis and Vicinity* (Chicago, 1908), 79-82. Johnson's memories of his early life were recorded by his grandson in Howard Johnson, ed., *A Home in the Woods: Oliver Johnson's Reminiscences of Early Marion County* (Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. XVI, No. 2; Indianapolis, 1951).

when 40 years old, attend school. Others spend their time and money in drinking. The value of this farm with improvement, house buildings and fencing, at the present time is 200 dollars an acre 41*l.* 10*s.* From as low as 10 bushels an acre of wheat has been raised up to 42 bushels, and of corn from 20 bushels up to 80 bushels.

Mr. Gallup,⁴ president of the Board of Trade, Indianapolis, says that within the last eight years freights to the seaboard (say to Boston) have been 80 cents the 100 lbs., they then dropped as low as 22 cents; this was followed by combination and the establishment of "the pool" among railway companies;⁵ and freights stand now at 42 cents per 100 lbs., equivalent to a rise of 6*d.* per bushel or 4*s.* a quarter in the carriage of the grain to the seaport, which now stands at 8*s.* 5*d.* per quarter of 480 lbs.

Mr. Chas. Dawson⁶ owns near Indianapolis 163 acres of fair land. In 1879, 100 acres of this was in corn, the remaining 63 acres in wood. Hog cholera has alarmed him, it has become so frequent. It is usual to follow a rotation in cropping—a simple one, wheat and corn. There are 25 acres sown with winter wheat this fall, and the truth is admitted that in this neighbourhood, to cultivate with success, farmers must begin to use fertilisers, and the sons of the present agriculturists will have to adopt the English plan.⁷ The fertiliser here is clover; the best farmers keep one-third of their land down in this plant for the scythe or feeding off, or to turn under the furrow for autumn-sown wheat. Sixty bushels is now accepted as a good crop of corn, against the higher average of 80 bushels, which was achieved

⁴ William P. Gallup, of Gallup, Clark & Co., Grain Dealers, was president of the Board of Trade in 1879-1880. Indianapolis Board of Trade, *Annual Report*, 1879, 6.

⁵ Cooperation by connecting railroads in the organization of fast freight lines was an important trend in the United States after the Civil War. The object of these lines, which operated pools of equipment from the railroads involved, was to offer through service, thereby cutting the costs and eliminating the inconvenience of transshipment. Their use completely changed the pattern of grain traffic. The route of grain from the West to the major market of Boston, for example, had been by way of the Great Lakes, the Erie Canal, and the Hudson River to New York, thence by coastal steamer. By 1874, however, the bulk of western grain arrived at Boston in through railroad cars. George Rogers Taylor and Irene D. Neu, *The American Railroad Network, 1861-1890* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), 67-76. The term pooling also came to denote agreements by which railroad companies sought to control prices by apportioning the available freight business rather than competing for it. Such agreements were outlawed by the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (7th ed., 2 vols., New York, 1963), I, 580.

⁶ Charles Dawson was born in Marion County in 1824. His agricultural career was interrupted by a two year visit to California, but in 1854 he returned to the Indiana farming he loved. His total holdings exceeded 600 acres. *Commemorative Biographical Record*, 203-204.

⁷ The work of the agricultural research station established at Rothamsted in 1843 encouraged British agriculturists to use artificial fertilizers and scientific plans of crop rotation rather than the older soil-exhausting system of alternating crops with fallow fields. Rowland E. P. Ernlé, *English Farming, Past and Present* (6th ed., reprint, London, 1961), 368-71, 440.

in years gone by, and it is universally admitted that the yield of land has diminished after being subjected to continuous cropping. Rates are 1 dollar an acre on land valued at 100 dollars, to which must be added 1 per cent. on personalty, equal to 25 cents per acre, making a total of over 6s. an acre.⁸

Mr. Luther Johnson's⁹ farm at Maidwell Grove consists of 205 acres; of this 40 acres are in wood, with some grazing ground under the trees; 62 acres have been wheat, 55 acres corn, and the balance in seeds for mowing and pasture. The stock are 6 horses and mules, 10 horned cattle, 75 to 150 sheep, 40 hogs; the last-named animals being objects of suspicion and alarm. The cholera breaks out without any warning or without the introduction of any fresh stock. The animals are alive and hearty in the morning and dead at night. Manure is put on the clover leys in the autumn for wheat, and again is supplied in the spring to land intended for corn. Seeds are kept down two, three, and four years. When Mr. Johnson was a boy blue grass was scarce, now it is very general in pastures.

A man and a pair of horses will grow and "cultivate" 25 acres of corn five times. Mr. Johnson employs two regular hands by the month, and one extra during three months, but Mr. Johnson's boy of 16 helps. Four extra men are wanted in harvest, at 1 dollar 50 cents a day, and bed and board; this is only for six or eight days. The pay of the regular hands is 13 dollars a month, with bed and board. In the month of November a hand may be secured for 75 cents and dinner. The labourers breakfast before sunrise, work from sunrise till 12, then lie by for one hour to work again till supper at 5, which is eaten "as fast as may be," and the day's toil is not concluded till the sun sets. On the longest day the sun rises at 4.32 and sets at 7.32. On the shortest day the sun rises at 7.22 and sets at 4.44. On April 1st it rises at 5.44 and sets at 6.24, and on October 1st it rises at 5.56 and sets at 5.43, giving during the year more hours of daylight for work than in England, with shorter days in summer and longer in winter.

Agricultural land is let at 6 dollars an acre, the owner paying the taxes. If the rent is paid in kind, the terms are these: the landlord finds all the land and pays all the taxes; he also does the repairs. For rent he takes half the grain threshed and delivered to granaries on the farm, and the corn in the ear to the farm cribs. The tenant pays another rent here by the month for the grass, which is not, as is sometimes the case, thrown into the bargain. Taxes on the farm are 1 dollar 85 cents per acre, to which that on personalty adds 15 cents more, making on the whole 2 dollars, or 8s. 4d. per acre. There have

⁸ Rates, of course, was the English term for taxes; 6s. was approximately \$1.44.

⁹ Luther Johnson was probably a brother of Oliver Johnson. *Commemorative Biographical Record*, 80.

been a great number of foreclosures of mortgages during the past three years, owing to the bad times. In 1879, 46¼ bushels per acre of wheat were grown on 35 acres, after clover for two years pastured with sheep; 32 acres in 1879 grew 35 bushels per acre after corn and after wheat. Corn will average in 1879 about 60 bushels per acre; though the average yield has been dropping during the past six years, and so has the yield of wheat. If that of 1879 is taken out of account, it will not rise above 18 bushels an acre on this farm, while that for the county during the same period does not exceed 13 bushels for wheat and 50 bushels for corn. The cost, however, of raising and harvesting a crop of wheat now, compared with that of 20 years ago, is probably less.

River washed wool was worth 75 to 80 cents in 1874; in the spring of 1879 it could be bought for 20 cents the lb., and now it has risen (November 1879) to 30 cents; 10 cents more, or 40 cents the lb., would satisfy the grower.

At Greencastle, Indiana, abortion among cows is said to be warded off by giving a pint of hemp every other day from the time of serving to the period at which the cow last slipped calf, but a great short-horn breeder placed no reliance on this prescription.

At Mr. Lockridge's¹⁰ farm is a roan bull, five years old, thoroughbred, with a splendid coat and grand rump and round; the charge for his use is 10 dollars or 2 guineas. Mr. Lockridge's herds were examined, beautiful short-horns, and in capital condition. Mr. Lockridge runs a big bullock to 5 acres this year, they are sold, and he has bought [*sic*] in 2 and 3 year old steers for next year's grass. They cost 3¼ cents per lb. and weighed 1,300 lbs., having grass only during the winter, save in coarse weather, when they may have hay or corn stalks. The arable land is let to tenants who give half the wheat (the landlord finding seed and paying for threshing his half crop) and one-third of the corn and oats. The soil in the neighbourhood of Indianapolis and Green Castle is a limestone and deep loam along the river bottoms.

¹⁰ Several Lockridges in the Greencastle area were noted stockmen. Andrew Malone Lockridge was born in Kentucky in 1814 and moved to Putnam County, Indiana, in 1835. In 1846 he moved to Greencastle where he built an elegant home and became "one of the heaviest and best known dealers in fine beef cattle in the state." His brother Robert and his sons, Simpson F., Alexander, and Albert, were also established stockmen by the time the British commissioners visited that area. *Biographical History of Eminent and Self-made Men of the State of Indiana* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1880), I, Fifth District, 23; Alvin H. Sanders, *Shorthorn Cattle* (Chicago, 1918), 415, 440, 510, 742. Simpson F. Lockridge, born in Putnam County in 1846, was active in the American Association Breeders Shorthorn Cattle of the United States and Province of Canada for eight years. Miss Eleanore Cammack, archivist, Roy O. West Library, DePauw University, to author, October 3, 1969; Mrs. William Boatright, president, Putnam County Historical Society, to author, October 4, 1969.

Dr. Stevenson,¹¹ of Green Castle, lets his arable land and takes in cattle to graze for 1 dollar a month.

Mr. Lockridge's thorough-bred Durhams are big thick-fleshed and are more adapted for the production of heavy feeding steers. At another of Mr. Lockridge's farms were seven majestic $4\frac{3}{4}$ years old graded steers. It was stated that when quartered the meat would be too large to hang between decks, and was therefore unfit on this account for exportation. They seemed, as well, to be too big and heavy for the English market, weighing as they did 2,300 lbs. They were expected to bring 6 cents a lb. at Christmas. The owner had already sold 40 away from this lot at $5\frac{1}{4}$ cents per lb., averaging 1,940 lbs. each.

The Hon. O. P. Davis¹² of Newport, Vermillion County, Indiana, grows from 1,000 to 1,200 acres of "corn" yearly; he finds the seed and gives from $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents to 15 cents per bushel for the cultivation. The land is ploughed 5 inches deep, harrowed[,] marked, dropt, cultivated four times, harvested, and delivered into cribs at that price. Mr. Collett¹³ of Eugene, Indiana, also pays $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents for growing corn. On really good deep land corn has been grown for 50 years and averaged 60 bushels an acre.

Professor John Collett,¹⁴ Indianapolis, has had from 25 to 40 tenants upon the family estate, and has let the land for 3 dollars an acre for wheat, corn, grass, and pasture: all landlord's outgoings amount to 25 cents an acre, which he pays, and also finds timber, &c. for repairs, tenants doing the labour. Mr. Isaac Porter,¹⁵ of Eugene,

¹¹ This was probably Dr. A. C. Stevenson of Putnam County who in 1853 made the second recorded importation of Shorthorns into Indiana direct from England. In 1872 he was elected first president of the state and national Short-horn Breeders' Associations. W. C. Latta, *Outline History of Indiana Agriculture* (Lafayette, 1938), 190. Dr. Stevenson attempted without much success to convince other breeders that Shorthorns made excellent milk as well as beef producers. See his remarks at the Indiana Short-Horn Breeders' Association, May 27, 1879, in *Annual Report of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture, 1879* (Indianapolis, 1879), 368-69.

¹² Oliver P. Davis was born in Warner, New Hampshire, in 1814. He settled in Vermillion County, Indiana, in 1840 and eventually acquired landholdings amounting to 1,300 acres. Davis was a delegate to the Indiana Constitutional Convention of 1851 and served in the state senate from Parke and Vermillion counties in 1863, 1865, 1875, and 1881. He died in 1892. Harold L. O'Donnell, *Newport and Vermillion Township: The First 100 Years, 1824-1924* (Danville, Ill., 1969), 221-23.

¹³ It has not been possible to identify which Collett was referred to here. Several members of that family apparently owned land in that general area.

¹⁴ John C. Collett, born in 1828 at Eugene, Indiana, was a state senator in 1871-1873 and state geologist 1879-1884. In 1879 he was using some 1,300 acres of improved land in Vermillion County. John D. Collett, "The Collett Family," in "Indiana Genealogy," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXV (September, 1939), 341; *Biographical History . . . of Indiana*, I, South District, 24-25.

¹⁵ Isaac Porter was born in 1833 in Vermillion County, where he served as sheriff from 1860 to 1864. He moved to Danville, Illinois, in 1878 but kept his large tract of bottom land in Indiana, where his son settled after Porter's death in 1898. Harold L. O'Donnell, *Eugene Township (Vermillion County, Indiana): The First 100 Years, 1824-1924* (Danville, Ill., 1963), 326-28.

Indiana, has land worth 60 dollars an acre, which he lets for wheat growing. It has grown wheat continually for 10 years, and he receives one half the produce, which has averaged 9 dollars an acre.

Mr. J. W. Davidson,¹⁶ of Mahomet, Illinois, lets 250 acres; 50 acres of wheat average 30 bushels, landlord finds seed and receives half crop; 150 acres of corn yield 60 bushels and landlord receives two-fifths of the crop; 50 acres oats yield 50 bushels, landlord finds seed and receives one-half for rent. He grazes the grass land himself, allowing the tenant 20 acres of pasture for his cows; 20 acres of meadow land are cut for hay, and the crop divided between landlord and tenant. Rates and taxes always paid by owner.

¹⁶ James W. Davidson was born in Ohio in 1844 and moved to Mahomet, Champaign County, Illinois, when he was about nine years old. He and a brother operated a grain mill and elevator. *History of Champaign County, Illinois* (Philadelphia, 1878), 128.