

Conservation Should not Mean Stagnation

There are 233 million acres of Crown Lands awaiting owners in the Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Of this, 43 million acres are surveyed and ready for occupation. Is settlement proceeding too fast or too slowly? Here is a question which every Canadian should be prepared to answer.

By JOHN A. COOPER

THAT sonorous battle-cry, "Conservation of Natural Resources," sounds somewhat Rooseveltian. That should not prevent us recognising the important principle which it represents; neither should it cause us to shut our eyes to its dangers if any such exist. Further, it is not possible for us to take our opinions ready-made from the United States. Their state of development is much in advance of ours and what is good policy for them now may not be good policy for Canada for some time to come. Let us therefore examine this battle-cry in its relation to our agricultural lands.

Does farming injure the value of the land farmed?

If it does, then it would be wise to conserve our natural resources in agricultural land by refusing to bring any more of it under cultivation. If, on the other hand, farming the land causes that land to increase in value, then all the unoccupied land in Canada should be brought under cultivation as soon as possible.

It does not need much argument to prove that farming the land which is suitable for farming improves its value. The farms of Ontario are to-day selling at \$75 an acre when once they sold at \$1 an acre. What caused the increase in value? The farms of Illinois, Iowa, Michigan and Minnesota are worth as much as the Ontario farms, though once they were going begging for purchasers at a nominal price. It is the same all over America. Manitoba lands selling a few years ago at \$3 an acre now bring from \$15 to \$50. Railways and settlement are responsible for some of this increase, but speaking generally, it is absolutely certain that farming increases rather than decreases the value of lands suitable for agriculture.

If this is a fair statement of the case, then it follows that Canada's unused agricultural land should not be conserved. It should be brought under cultivation, so as to increase the country's assets, the country's population, and the country's annual production of wealth.

To put it in another way. If "conservation of natural resources" were taken to mean a withholding of agricultural lands from settlement, then it would be a grave misunderstanding, a grand error, an unwise and unsound policy.

Using the water of a river to generate power is not dissipating a natural resource; it is conserving it, in the sense that it is making it useful to mankind. The river goes on, like Tennyson's brook, forever, no matter how many water-powers may be created along its banks. It is much the same with agricultural land. The more it is cultivated or "agricultured" the more valuable it becomes.

Some conservationists seem to have taken a different view. These new-born enthusiasts look at the Department of Interior maps and cry, "The public land is nearly all gone." If this were true, it would be a compliment to that Department, not a condemnation. Gone where? Gone into the hands of men and women who are making it more valuable. Gone to the production of wheat and oats and barley and potatoes and flax which are exchanged for ploughs, harvesting machinery, houses, barns and bank accounts. Gone to provide support for millions of new citizens who are proud to be called Canadians. Gone to swell the assets of the new nation which is growing so lustily on the northern half of the North American continent. That is where these unoccupied, uncultivated lands have gone, and the ultra-conservationist should not forget it.

Everything for the Settler.

Since 1902, not an acre of Dominion lands in Western Canada has been given or sold to anyone but a genuine settler. Before that, large blocks were given to railways or sold to land companies. The last block of land to be sold to a company was sold to the Saskatchewan Valley Land Company and there were special reasons for the sale. But during the past eight years, there have been no similar transactions. Only genuine farmers got the land. Even the Saskatchewan Valley Land Company got its land subject to settlement and

homestead conditions, the same as individuals.

The Crown lands in the West have been rapidly disposed of, farm by farm. The authorities have taken the view that they should be given away practically free to men who would cultivate them. Men have gone into the highlands of Scotland and bought thousands of acres of farms and turned them into sheep pastures, and these districts now produce sheep instead of men. The Government of Canada has pursued a policy of giving its unoccupied land only to cultivators of the soil, to men who will live on the land, build a house and barns, and cultivate a certain proportion of the land. The state makes the man a proprietor on the condition that he works for the state. The state gives the land away, but increases the number of its citizens and the total production of the country.

It is a curious coincidence that some high official of the Government of England was once seized of the same idea as Canada has worked out in her land policy. On the 7th day of December, 1763, there was issued in the name of George III a letter addressed to Governor Murray of the Province of Quebec, and the first paragraph of that letter read as follows:

"And, whereas, great inconveniences have arisen in many of our colonies in America from the granting excessive quantities of land to particular persons who have never cultivated nor settled it, and have thereby prevented others more industrious from improving the same; in order therefore to prevent the like inconveniences for the future, you are to take especial care, that in all grants to be made by you, by and with the advice and consent of our Council, to persons applying for the same, the quantity be in proportion to their ability to cultivate."

It will thus be seen that the Canadian officials are but pursuing an ancient and honourable policy, one that has stood the test of nearly a century and a half of human experience.

Should the land be held by the Government for a higher price? This is a reasonable question and one worth consideration. If held by the Government until the population grows denser on this continent, it certainly would bring a higher price. But would that increased price make up for the annual loss in having the land lie idle? If the land comes under immediate cultivation, it is cropped annually, and the wealth of the nation is annually increased. To let it lie idle would involve an annual loss of many millions and in ten years this would amount to several times more than the unearned increment of the land.

Nothing for the Speculator.

Again, the Government now gives the land away free to those who will go on the land and begin cultivation immediately. This means that all the railway companies and land companies who got lands under the conditions which prevailed last century must sell their lands with this competition. It keeps down the price of all privately owned lands in the West and makes settlement more rapid. This is an additional reason why the so-called "conservation" of the Crown lands in the West would, at present, be inadvisable.

Some one may say that this is unfair to the private owners of land in the West, to the railway companies, land companies and others who have an interest in that portion of the Dominion. There is an answer to this also. The increase in population gradually helps everybody. What the Government takes away, it returns to the private owners by the general increase in population and all that increase means in the way of better roads, better schools, better markets and better railway facilities. If the private owner is compelled to sell at a reasonable price, the getting of that reasonable price is made easier by the growth in population and general facilities.

Again, free land attracts the right kind of immigrant. The city loafer from Great Britain or the idler from the south of Europe will not pay the

price in work which the Government demands. The men who are filling up these western districts are men of ability and energy and industry. They must be physically strong and mentally sound to fulfil the conditions imposed. To the man who can work and is ambitious, Canada affords a magnificent opportunity. To the man who is not of this description, the homestead regulations are an impossible barrier. The best that we have we give to the settler who will come and take it and use it for the general good. To the loafer nothing; to the speculator, not an acre.

The other day, I asked an official of the Department of the Interior, if it were not possible for a man to go to a land office in one of these famous "land rushes" and get a farm and then sell it. His answer was an emphatic "No." The man who enters for a section must go on the farm, live there for three years, cultivate so much of the soil, erect buildings of a certain value, before he can get a clear title. Of-course, he can sell then, if he so desires. He becomes a proprietor in the fullest sense and no one may prevent his selling it in any way that he wishes. But he sells then a cultivated farm with buildings on it and his successor must needs carry on the good work to get value out of his purchase. For eight years, it has been impossible to get a Government grant in any other way.

Canada is fortunate in being in the market with her agricultural land at a time when agriculture as a science is developing fast. If this land had come under cultivation fifty years ago, much of it might have been cropped to death and abandoned. Fortunately the revolution in agriculture came just as the people of the world were ready to go into the West. The different governments, through their agricultural departments, their demonstration farms, their agricultural colleges and the agricultural press are teaching men how to conserve the soil. There are a large number of big men who are putting their brains at the service of the farming public and showing how land can be used without injury, how the best results can be obtained with the least expenditure of labour or soil-content. This is an additional justification for Canada's present policy, since it gives further assurance that this great national asset—our agricultural land—will increase, not decrease, in value.

Only One-Tenth Cultivated.

These arguments apply only to purely agricultural land—land without valuable timber, or minerals. Most of the land now open for settlement, almost all of it indeed, is of this character. The Government's policy in giving away the land to settlers and to settlers only, seems to be eminently sound and economic. It is providing Canada with an increase in population of generous proportions and suitable character. It is keeping all the lands in the West at a fairly moderate price. It is increasing the annual agricultural production of the Dominion by leaps and bounds. It means a "square deal" to every man who is earnestly anxious to become an individual proprietor. It is broadening the area of settlements to the general advantage of the earlier settlers, the merchants and the transportation companies. It is increasing the general wealth of the country and making the nation better fitted to cope with the larger problems of development. Conservation of natural resources is a good policy but as applied to land it simply means conservation of the public interest in the land. The public interest in the land is to have it brought under cultivation as rapidly as possible, and thus have it contribute to the expense of the nation-building. The present policy does this, therefore let it continue. There is plenty of land available. Only about one-half of the Last Great West is yet under survey; only one-tenth is yet under cultivation. Here are the figures:

	Acres.
Total area of three prairie provinces	335,000,000
" " surveyed	145,000,000
" " surveyed and disposed of	102,000,000
" " surveyed and undisposed of	43,000,000
" " broken up for crop	36,000,000
" " under grain crop 1909	12,000,000
" " under wheat 1909	6,678,000
" wheat production 1909 (bushels)	147,000,000

Here is, the answer in a nutshell. There are 190 million acres unsurveyed and 43 million surveyed in the hands of the Government. Thus in these three provinces alone, there are 233 million acres known as Crown lands. If one-half of it is suitable for cultivation, there is enough land available to give 160 acres to 750,000 homesteaders. In addition to this, there must be another 40 million acres in the hands of railway companies, the Hudson's Bay Company, land companies and speculators not yet sold to actual settlers.