

ADVANTAGES OF FREE TRADE TO LANDED INTERESTS,
IN A LETTER TO JOHN ROLFE, ESQ.

BY WM. BROWN, ESQ.

MY DEAR SIR,—In sending you my remarks on your Aversham speech, I write to you, not only in the character of a merchant, who has had transactions all over the world, but in that of a landed proprietor, who, in common with other gentlemen interested in the soil, is desirous to support the rent tolls. I think it right to state this, that you may see that, in our discussion, I stand on neutral ground. In your first observation, I believe you in error, when you speak of the landed interest as the mainstay of the state. By this I understand you to mean, that it is the most wealthy and most numerous. The last census, and the collection of the income tax, will put you right on these points. My first letter to Mr. Patten will show you how the population question stands. Out of £5,525,000 raised from the income tax, £1,400,000 only is collected from land. You next allude to the League wishing to injure you. I presume it will not be denied, that all interests in this kingdom are so linked together that none of them can suffer without the others being injured. We must sink or swim together! Paradoxical as it may appear, I think Great Britain is the largest grain-exporting country in the world, although it is impossible to estimate accurately what quantity of grain, &c., is consumed in preparing £50,000,000 value of exports, by which you so greatly benefit. It is placed in the laboratory of that wonderful intellectual machine, man, which gives him the physical power, aided by steam, of converting it into broadcloths, calico, hardware, &c. and in these shapes your wheats find their way to every country in the world.

Within this century, this country alone has had use for 1,500,000 more manufacturers, merchants, and those depending on trade, than at any previous period. These, aided and assisted by our natural advantages, have found foreign markets for you everywhere. On the other hand, your prosperity is very important to the merchants and manufacturers, for they must cease to make and export goods, or to be able to use the agricultural produce of the country, unless they can find purchasers for their returns.

Now, it appears from the income of land, that the landlords have £40,000,000 annually to spend, one way or other; for it is on this sum that the £1,400,000 of income tax is paid, and it follows that a good deal of it must be laid out for wine, sugar, coffee, spirits, and other luxuries and necessaries. Can anything, therefore, be more clear, than that it is the interest of the manufacturers and merchants, that all landlords, farmers, and labourers, &c. &c., should be sustained and made more affluent, by which they may become more extensive customers, enabling the merchants to increase their importations? Be assured, the great movers in the League are quite aware of this, and have these objects steadily in view. You must not judge of "Cobden and Co." by what a few hot-headed people may say; and you now somehow, from pre-conceived notions, fancy protection everything, and miscel as destructives.

I think you must admit that my argument, so far, is good, and that our prosperity as a nation has been in spite of our restrictions, and not in virtue of them; and that there is no desire with the League to inflict any losses on the landlord and the farmer; and for a very good reason, by so doing, they would injure themselves. I give the great mass of both parties credit for being honest in their intentions, for they think they can arrive at the same end by different means: you, by Protection, we, by Free Trade; you fear dependence on foreigners, we are now dependent on foreigners for using your wheat in the shape of broadcloths, &c., and I wish we were more so. It is the best security among nations for the preservation of peace, and preventing increased taxation, whilst it promotes prosperity. The farmers and landlords have a natural protection, without other nations having any cause of complaint; the extent of which you do not at all seem aware of, and which Mr. Wilson's book, and the trade of the Channel Islands, will fully explain. You fancy other nations are untaxed, and have no national debt. Pray point them out! I think you will find, on enquiry, that the taxation of this country, taking into view its wealth and ability to pay, is as light as in any country I know, even in the United States. Indeed, I have been much astonished at the burthens that some of the States have to bear, and in part from a direct land tax. France raises about the same amount of revenue that we do, £50,000,000, and but £5,000,000 of it from the Customs—£10,000 is from a direct land tax. We collect £20,000,000 from the Customs. In Flanders, from Bamfield's lectures, it appears, they pay as much as 30s. an acre, land tax. Austria has a large national debt, and an army of 460,000 men, these cannot be maintained without a heavy taxation. Prussia, when she cannot raise more money from her subjects charges 1s per bushel at the mill on all that is ground—(Holland and Austria do the same), her large military force (for every man in Prussia, no matter what his rank, must serve in the army for a certain length of time) makes her taxation and expenses oppressive; and a moment's reflection, or history, will teach us that every despotic monarch squeezes his subjects for as much money as he can extract from them; this checks the accumulation of wealth and production. All the petty princes in the Zollverein are overburdened by their military establishments. I dwell more particularly on this subject, as you seem to think the landed interest have extensive burdens on their shoulders, as compared with other nations, and that they require protection. This is not so; nor are they more burthened than the other classes of the community. You are really all frightened at a shadow.

You next speak of how small an amount of value in bread is consumed by the working classes, adding, that if the price was lower it would take away rent altogether; but you forget beef, pork, mutton, milk, butter, cheese, potatoes, &c., and that rent is not a small portion of the cost. If wheat, the most convenient article for export, is a little dearer, other articles of agricultural produce would advance, under a prosperous trade, and that rents would not be lower you have positive proof this year. Any wheat that would come here would only help to keep at home our 100,000 human machines, and sustain our 400,000 annual increase, and

again be sent away in the shape of the products of our industry. The population of Europe is increasing so rapidly with peace, that had we now a failing crop, it is a matter of great doubt whether we could get any aid from them worth notice. At Dantzic wheat is now 46s. per quarter, and in some parts of Poland 60s. France, Holland, Belgium, and Poland, will all want supplies from other countries. Belgium and Holland now admit grain without, or at a nominal, duty. The fact is, instead of keeping our people at home to manufacture for the rest of the world, and be your best customers at your own door, for the products of the soil, our anti-commercial policy is forcing them to emigrate to seek work elsewhere; and other nations are employing their hands to do what we could have done better for them, and at a lower price. Suppose we imported all the wheat required for their use, consider the amount of wages that would reach the agriculturist, directly or indirectly, for other descriptions of produce, independent of wheat. Nor need you be afraid of the United States; their population is increasing still more rapidly than that of Europe; and their growth of wheat is not excessive; it was, in 1843, but 12,500,000 quarters, in 1844 it was under 12,000,000; of Indian corn in 1843 it was 65,500,000, and in 1844 only 53,000,000 of quarters. You are aware that our growth of wheat is estimated at 18,000,000 of quarters; and of all kinds of grain, beans, &c., at 60,000,000. The Americans rear an immense quantity of live stock; they keep double the quantity of horses that we do; more cattle more pigs, and more poultry. Surely it is more desirable for you to get your Indian corn, free of duty, to feed your winter stock, and place you on a footing to compete against the Belgian, Spanish, and Dutch cattle feeders. I am afraid we could not get a very large supply of Indian corn, as the bulk, compared with value, would make it a very expensive article of import. If our Government will allow you to import cheap provender to feed more cattle, it will furnish you with more manure, and enable you to grow more wheat at less expense.

It is obviously our true policy to increase our trade with other nations, from which they would also reap advantage; and not to irritate and provoke them, by our exclusive system, to issue hostile tariffs against us. We know they are disposed to meet us fairly; and with the advantages we have in climate, capital, security for property, intelligence, machinery, improved agricultural implements, and above all, in that immense and cheap supply of the moving power, coal, we can afford to give higher prices for agricultural produce, to sustain the rent rolls of the landlords, and maintain England as the most powerful and prosperous kingdom, and the principal workshop in the world. It is to good employment for the people, contentment at home, and peace with other nations, and not to a reduction in the price of provisions, that I look for the benefit to arise from the freedom of trade. You speak of the tax on malt; as long as you pay that tax, the League does not object to the foreigners paying it too; but you are too sensible a man to suppose that it falls on the land; it is on the consumer, the same as the tax I pay on the importation of sugar; for so long as wheat, beef, and mutton pay you as well as barley, you will grow wheat, beef, and mutton, but when barley does better for you, then you will grow barley, notwithstanding the tax. It may, in some measure, lessen the quantity consumed, as the duty does on sugar; but this is not important; as we are a grain-importing country, it shows we have use for the land, without growing barley.

The manufacturers of Manchester have over and over again told the Government that they do not want protection,—they want a free trade in everything; therefore, the argument of their being protected should not be arrayed against them. Indeed, I think if the protecting and countervailing duties were swept away, many articles now prohibited would be as little sent here as coals are sent to Newcastle. In Mr. Wilson's publication you see clearly stated, what most merchants know to be an unanswerable argument against the sliding-scale or any protecting duty. I, with him, contend that it does you an irreparable injury: it professes to protect you by high duties, when you have a natural protection from low prices which do not remunerate you,—say 43s., as in 1842, and again 39s. as in 1835; which low prices are produced by the stimulus, and expectation of protection; and the sliding-scale withdraws it, when you could, by high prices, get some compensation for your losses at the low prices. But no Government dare keep the duty on grain: when it is very high, it would revolutionize the country, hunger will break through stone walls.

Your speech contains topics so various, and seems to embrace so much of complaint, that it is impossible to reply to all minute details; and yet my letter has taken a wider range, than is desirable consistent with brevity. What we free-traders complain of is, that we cannot get our opponents to read the arguments for and against the Corn Laws. They have made up their minds that their own views are right, and they will not put themselves to the trouble, or may not have time, to investigate the truth; nevertheless, it is making its way slowly, but surely; and as the opinion of such a man as yourself has great weight with your neighbours, and the gentlemen around you, you ought not to rest in your bed without a thorough investigation of the subject. Read, therefore, and earnestly, on our side of the question, the *Economist* and the *League*; on your own side, the most approved publications which from time to time issue from the press; and read the speeches at protection and Anti-Corn-Law meetings. Hold the balance without prejudice; pay no attention to intemperate expressions on either side—they are no arguments, and only annoy and mislead the judgment; and I am sure, if you will take this trouble, you will think "Cobden and his crew" a very honest set of fellows, who have toiled to obtain the knowledge they possess, not for selfish purposes, but for the benefit of mankind. I am far from blaming you for the views you have hitherto taken, when I know you are so much occupied, and when I know that protection has been considered the desideratum for the landlords. We merchants have access to information every day, from practical operations that are not within your beat; it is, therefore, only by constant discussion and reading, that you arrive at correct conclusions.

Ever, yours respectfully,
WILLIAM BROWN.