

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 8
Issue 1 *March*

Article 4

March 1968

The Rural Exodus in America: Unpublished Notes by "A.E."

Henry Summerfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 8, no.1, March 1968, p.13-19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Colby Library Quarterly 13

the powers of the self. Fortunately this volume serves as a prelude rather than the conclusion to his poetry. Aware now of a range of intensified moments, he tries to steer memories and desires; he guards himself against the intrusion of violent and trivial men. Frequently he subdues restive memories, transforming them into poetic images. Most promising for his remaining years, he has penetrated the mystery of the opposing forces of consciousness and can capitalize on his understanding of the warfare of subjective and objective forces. It is no small achievement to hear the *Ille* and *Hic* within speaking their full wisdom, and he may turn off his light, as the poet in his tower does in "The Phases of the Moon" if he grows tired of the strained exposition of his occult spokesman. In large measure, this volume makes it possible for the poet in his middle fifties to construct in his later poems the most comprehensive, searching, and complete secondary personality in contemporary letters.



THE RURAL EXODUS IN AMERICA:
UNPUBLISHED NOTES BY "A. E."

By HENRY SUMMERFIELD

Although George W. Russell, better known as the poet "A. E.", is most often remembered as a writer of the Irish Literary Renaissance, the major part of his life was devoted to the service of Ireland in other fields and especially to the betterment of its backward and impoverished farmers. After eight years of practical experience as an organizer of agricultural co-operative societies, he served from 1905 to 1923 as editor of *The Irish Homestead*, a weekly paper which existed to support the farmers' co-operative movement. During these years Russell became one of the best known men in Ireland.

The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society had been founded near the end of the nineteenth century by Sir Horace Plunkett, who was able to draw on the experience of the already existing continental societies. The I.A.O.S. became in its turn a center

14 Colby Library Quarterly

of international interest and a model for new movement in the English-speaking world and in Asia. Russell was frequently consulted by foreign visitors at his well-known office in Merrion Square, and evidence that he took patriotic pride in the more than parochial significance of his work frequently appears in the editorial pages of *The Irish Homestead*.

In 1913 the American Commission of Agriculture Enquiry visited Ireland and its members were much moved by a speech which "A. E." delivered on July 15th.¹ It was not so much a mastery of technical detail which impressed his audience as the fervor he was able to communicate. For him the liberation of the small Irish farmers from a rigorous bondage to the men who had entrapped them into permanent indebtedness was a labor worthy of those who would build a new civilization. He conceived of himself and his fellow co-operators as the pioneers of a new Ireland, which would embody the spiritual and artistic genius of the ancient Gael, while securing economic justice for all its citizens.

The agricultural co-operative movement, which Russell thought of as the groundwork of an as yet unborn civilization, received a severe setback from the shameful reprisals of the notorious Black and Tans, who, in 1920 and 1921, wrecked co-operative dairies all over Ireland in the hope of injuring as many of the country people as possible. The Civil War of the succeeding years wreaked such further havoc that Russell could no longer hope, as he had in 1919, for the imminent birth of the co-operative commonwealth. In the Free State, however, a new role was found for him, again through the agency of Plunkett. The editorship of *The Irish Statesman*, which he held with great distinction from 1923 to 1930, gave him scope for a wider and more complete exercise of his talents than had hitherto been possible. For eighteen years he had thought and written primarily for farmers; he now became the guide and educator of a nation and the immense range of his interests benefited not only the friends and acquaintances who enjoyed the hospitality of his famous Sunday evenings, but the serious reading public of the whole country. During the first years of Ireland's independence "A. E.'s" review was without a rival.

1 See H. F. Norman, *George Russell* [London, 1936], 18.

Colby Library Quarterly 15

From early youth Russell had felt a deep interest in the United States, an interest deriving from an intense enthusiasm for Emerson and Whitman; in a letter to Yeats of 1898 he speaks of his old longing to tramp through America.² His desire to visit the New World was fulfilled only in 1928 when he lectured all over the country between January and March to raise funds for the financially unstable *Irish Statesman*. As a lecturer and a personality he was extraordinarily popular and successful. His idealism drew people to him, and again and again in reading the recollections of those who met him one is struck by the profound and startling impression he made. Though he had been disappointed in his early hope that Emerson and Whitman would have spiritual successors who would complete their work and create an American "planetary consciousness," he accepted the country as it was and fully appreciated its qualities and achievements. The variety of the landscape and the kindness and energy of the people delighted him; his friend Gogarty thought that he would have made a magnificent American.³ Perhaps what impressed him most was the grandeur of the architecture, which reminded him of the noble cities of the ancient world and convinced him that a great power was incarnate in this people.

Russell made three further visits to America—in June 1928, to receive an honorary degree from Yale, from September 1930 to the following May, on a lecture tour to earn money for his wife's medical treatment, and from December 1934 to March 1935, to lecture and to advise the American Government on its rural policies. The problem of the rural exodus, the large scale migration of farm workers to the cities, which was at this time troubling the American authorities, had been a subject of deep concern to Russell for many years. He had long ago come to believe that through co-operation an organic rural community of free and unregimented but inter-dependent individuals could be created, and that around such communities a new phenomenon—a civilization centered not upon the cities but upon the country—could be made to crystallize. This conception, put forward in *Co-operation and Nationality* (1912) and *The National Being* (1916), was outlined in that very address which so impressed the American Commission in 1913.

² Alan Denson (editor), *Letters from A. E.* (London, 1961), 28.

³ Oliver St. John Gogarty, *Intimations* (New York, 1950), 261.

1. Smaller state laboratory - Greece
2. Unfortunate & naive when do I see
new form. National Being
Agricultural Accounts
3. The Beauty of life. The ancient one
to war & rape & blind have already
shown & exhausted. Good will be found
4. Moral & modern. You in the thoughts
of the great state are attracted by the inner
African which on the old ones ~~is~~ ~~is~~
with. 7
5. You have become like Ireland & Greece &
great ones could they be like modern
England was the best of the great ~~ones~~ states
to reject its moral ~~top~~ for a clean
industry. It has become like a man
of his own & long childhood. It comes
down with the dream of sleep ~~which~~
which used to relate its incidents
It develops a city ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~middle~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~
nature gradually ~~it~~ ~~is~~ ~~not~~ ~~at~~ ~~all~~
look on the black country we find the
~~strong~~ ~~type~~ ~~which~~ ~~is~~ ~~the~~ ~~unseen~~
they own strange in form & then able to the
spirit. now it matters to them that
from the central ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~down~~ ~~then~~
eyes in road form. For the wealthy ~~is~~ ~~in~~
arms & so are we attracted. But the
unseen mind ~~is~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~old~~ ~~and~~
of them ~~is~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~old~~ ~~and~~
Nothing has ever been a ~~London~~
of the ~~birth~~ ~~generation~~.

One of Russell's most astonishing faculties was his extraordinarily retentive verbal memory. He knew the whole of his own poetry by heart and could recite long passages of prose he had read years before. His ideas about the rural exodus remained essentially unaltered over a period of about twenty years. It has not been possible to discover for which of his American tours the lecture notes below were written, but in assembling his ideas Russell repeated with minor variations sentences which were included in *Co-operation and Nationality* published in 1912, and which made their first appearance in print even earlier in his contributions to *The Irish Homestead*. These passages are indicated editorially.

The lecture notes are contained in a pocket notebook which was generously presented to Colby College by Diarmuid Russell, "A. E.'s" son, and they are published here by his kind permission. Compiled in obvious haste for the writer's own use, they are barely legible and occasional words have proved impossible to decipher. Words of which the correct reading remains doubtful are followed by a question mark and enclosed in brackets. Where words and phrases are struck out but not replaced by others, so that the sense is rendered incomplete, these are printed in parentheses and followed by a colon and the italicized word "deleted." There is no title. The punctuation of the manuscript is reproduced.

NOTES ON THE RURAL EXODUS

- 1 Smallest states (like Italy?) and Greece⁴
- 2 What should I speak what do I know about farmers. National Being
Agricultural Organisation
- 3 The fluidity of life. The (*word deleted and illegible*) was so vast and vague and (*two words illegible*) (difficulty?) danger and exhaustion. Quick (*word illegible*)
- 4 Rural Exodus: You in the (young [est]: *deleted*) of the great states are attacked by the urban disease which in the old world came in age.
- 5 You have become like England and Europe! Great cities which spring up like fountains England was the first of the great states to neglect its rural (life: *deleted*) for urban industry.

4. I.e. The city states of mediaeval Italy and ancient Greece. Cf. *Co-operation and Nationality* (Dublin, 1912), 60.

It has become like a woman exhausted by long childbearing.⁵ It cannot send up the stream of strong bodies which used to restock its industry. It develops a city population out of which nature gradually dies and if we look at the black country we find the (strangest: *deleted*) types which horrify the imagination they run strange in form and character to the spirit; and it mad-dens to think that man the immortal man the divine shall exist in such form.⁶ For the wealthy who can come and go are not affected. But the workers must remain and life dies out of them generation after generation. Nobody has ever found a Londoner of the fourth generation.⁷

You are losing your rural population. They are being absorbed by the cities. The sons and daughters of the farmer are drawn from their homes. Since 1920 no less than four million people have left the land. The town (life: *deleted*) means civilised life to them. Civilization has (always: *deleted*) been a flare up on a few square miles of brick and mortar and outside these there is almost everywhere the same mean dwellings the same ignorance and burdensome life.⁸ You have built up a great civilization upon towns but you neglected the country (*Several words added as an afterthought illegible.*) We have to imagine a new civilization. What should we desire to give the country folk. We should aim that even if (they can [*word illegible*]: *deleted*) so healthy and pleasant and intellectual a life that none would willingly depart from the land.⁹

We must imagine precisely. We cannot let life develop haphazard. There must be something like self (determination?) or (willing?) if the ideal aim of man be (unselfish?) humanity. Just as houses are in the plan of the architect or as ships are designed to the (last: *deleted*) (*word illegible*) and last plank or plate before a keel is laid down in the yards.

Do you imagine anything beautiful comes by chance. The

⁵ Russell first made this comparison in his leading article in the *Irish Homestead*, 20 February 1909. It is repeated in *Co-operation and Nationality*, 50.

⁶ Russell expressed this sentiment in connection with the wretched existence of the Connemara peasantry in his "Notes of the Week," *Irish Homestead*, 1 June 1907. It reappears in *Co-operation and Nationality*, 14.

⁷ In the leading article of the *Irish Homestead*, 10 August 1907. Russell states: "A sociologist, who made endless enquiries, never was able to meet a Londoner of the fourth generation." Cf. also *Co-operation and Nationality*, 102.

⁸ This statement appears in "Notes of the Week," *Irish Homestead*, 21 September 1907, and in *Co-operation and Nationality*, 4.

⁹ Cf. *The National Being*, second edition (Dublin, 1917), 31.

Colby Library Quarterly 19

white pillars of the Parthenon existed first in the mind of the architect before that beauty was built in white stone.¹⁰

We had to think about the same problem in Ireland for within living memory the population declined from 8 million to four million. We have no big cities. America is our one big city¹¹ and about thirty five years ago a group of patriots began to think desperately about their country in its decadence.¹² What did they do (they formed an organis [ation]: *deleted*) decided that the farmers must be organised and brought into an organic unity.

The farmers cannot do this for themselves. There must be an intelligence (trained?)

Your cities are outdoing Babylon and Nineveh in radiance, but your rural life is dwindling. The forces in rural and urban life are like those beings spoken of by Heraclitus one lives the others death one dies the others life, and the cities are living the death of the countryside.

To leave a glory on the age when your sun has set you must leave much beauty in the world. You must seem to the imagination of history that you were somehow in the divine provision, that your leaders and great men had their eyes fixed on the far off divine event and so I suggest to you as one of the things you may make (*two words illegible*) is to build up a rural civilization you have done great things but it is not the work which is done which excites enthusiasm but the work which is yet to be done the long vistas the yet unfolded clo [se]¹³

¹⁰ This statement appears in the leading article of the *Irish Homestead*, 17 December 1910, and in *Co-operation and Nationality*, 84.

¹¹ I.e. Our rural emigrants go to the U. S. A. as we have no large cities to absorb them.

¹² This refers to Sir Horace Plunkett and his followers, especially R. A. Anderson and Father T. A. Finlay. Plunkett began his great work of promoting co-operation among Irish farmers in 1889 and founded the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society in 1894.

¹³ This not very original sentiment was a favorite of Russell's and characteristic of his optimism. It occurs in the leading article of the *Irish Homestead*, 4 November 1905, and in *Co-operation and Nationality*, 32.

