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THE AUSTRALIAN MEETING OF THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION.

SECTION M.

AGRICULTURE.

ADDRESS BY A. D. HALL, M.A., F.R.S., PRESIDENT OF THE SECTION.

THE president of a section of the British Association has two very distinct precedents before him for his address; he can either set about a general review of

the whole subject to which his section is devoted, or he can give an account of one of his own investigations which he judges to be of wider interest and application than usual. The special circumstances of this meeting in Australia have suggested to me another course. I have tried to find a topic which under one or other of its aspects may be equally interesting both to my colleagues from England and to my audience who are farming here in this great Continent. My subject will be the winning of new land for agriculture, the bringing into cultivation of land that has hitherto been left to run to waste because it was regarded as unprofitable to farm. To some extent, of course, this may be regarded as the normal process by which new countries are settled; the Bush is cleared and the plough follows, or under other conditions the rough native herbage gives way to pasture under the organised grazing of sheep or cattle. I wish, however, to deal exclusively with what are commonly termed the bad lands, inasmuch as in many parts of the world, though recently settled, agriculture is being forced to attack these bad lands because the supply of natural farming land is running short. In a new country farming begins on the naturally fertile soils that only require a minimum of cultivation to yield profitable crops, and the new-comers wander further afield in order to find land which will in the light of their former experience be good. Before long the supply is exhausted, the second-class land is then taken up until the stage is reached of experimentation upon soils that require some special treatment or novel form of agriculture before they can be utilised at all. Perhaps North America affords the clearest illustration: its great agricultural development came with the opening up of the prairies of the Middle West, where the soil, rich in the accumulated fertility of past cycles of vegetation, was both easy to work and grateful for exploitation. But with the growth of population and the continued demand for land no soils of that class have been available for the last generation or so, and latterly we find the problem has been how to make use of the arid lands, either by irrigation or by dry-farming where the rainfall can still be made adequate for partial cropping, or, further, how to convert the soils that are absolutely poisoned by alkali salts into something capable of growing a crop. You yourselves will supply better than I can the Australian parallels; at any rate we in England read that the wheat-belt is now being extended into districts where the low rainfall had hitherto been thought to preclude any systematic cropping.

Now, the fact that the supply of naturally fertile land is not unlimited reacts in its turn upon the old countries. During the 'eighties and 'nineties of the last century the opening up of such vast wheat areas in America, Argentina, Australia, and the development of the overseas trade, reduced prices in Europe to such an extent that in Great Britain, where the full extent of the competition was experienced, the extension of agriculture came to an end despite the continued increase of population. The area of land under cultivation has declined but little despite the growth of the towns, but the process of taking in the waste lands stopped, and much of the land already farmed fell back from arable to cheaper pasture. But as soon as production in the newer countries failed to keep pace with the growth of population, prices began to rise again, and we are now in the Old World endeavouring to make productive the land that has hitherto been of little service except for sport and the roughest of grazing. Even the most densely populated European countries contain great areas of uncultivated land; within fifty miles of London blocks of a thousand acres of waste may be found, and Holland and Belgium, perhaps the most intensively cultivated of all Western