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Farming as a Business

Good Farming. By V. C. Fishwick.
(English Universities Press. 3s.)

By H. E. BATES

This book, the key volume to the new "Teach Yourself Farming" series, does not belong to that category of books on the countryside which open with the inevitable text that "farming is a way of life rather than a business." Nor is it a sermon on the texts of Rudolf Steiner; it has nothing to say of the lamentable social significance of the decaying pastimes of village greens. It is, in fact, in no circumstances recommended to romantics, and if you are one of those persons who, having saved a thousand pounds, hope to buy with it a few acres, a few cows, a few pigs, a few hens, and a few sheep, all of delightfully mixed breeds, and make from them a pleasant living in what you hope will be the better days of peace, you cannot do better than spend three shillings on Mr. Fishwick and think again.

Of all books on farming and the countryside that I ever read this is probably, I think, the most practical. It is even more practical than "Living in the Country," which a few years ago wiped so much of the rose-bloom off the surface of the conventional picture of rural living. Whereas that book showed how charm can sometimes be extracted from sheer disillusionment, this book continually disillusiones. Does farming pay? Is the Large White a better bacon pig than the Berkshire? What is the value of the temporary ley? What machinery ought to be necessary on a 500-acre farm? Above all—heretical question—can farming be taught?

Such unenchanted questions, with their answers, confront you on every page. Do you believe that farmers are born and not made? Do you cherish the fond belief that your son, because he cannot qualify as a surgeon, a stockbroker, a barrister, or a banker, will therefore automatically, in defiance of nature, make a good farmer? If you do, then Mr. Fishwick, in a firm professional manner which is somehow never controversial, is ready to put you right. He believes that farmers can be trained in school, without contending that such training can be more than about a third complete. He believes in the study, for the young farmer, of such things as mycology, entomology, chemistry, physics, and botany without ever giving them greater importance than the things a farmer learns by hand. He even believes in farm accountancy.

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Mr. Fishwick discusses practically every branch of farming known to this country, where diversity is perhaps the most notable characteristic of our agriculture; he gives tables and costs; he has something to say of small farms and big farms, intensive farms and representative farms; and what he does not discuss himself he leaves other experts to do in several separate chapters. And perhaps the best tribute to his all-roundness, his zeal for good farming generally and the soundness of his practice and theory comes from a young farmer neighbour of mine, late pupil of Mr. Fishwick and now a no-horse, all-tractor farmer of progressive practice on successful lines, to whom I lent this book. On the principle that a grain of praise from the pupil is worth a ton from the reviewer, I quote his comment: "Well, really you know, old Fishwick is not half bad, not half bad"; which if I were a professor of anything at all, I should call not half bad indeed.