

William Vogt's "Road to Survival"

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THIS is not a pleasant book to read, but it is not an easy book to stop reading. In the first chapter the reader is introduced to a number of hypothetical persons who symbolize the plight of humanity: an Indian woman who walks five miles for a day's supply of water; a lumberman making money at the price of a city's watershed; a dying coolie in the dust of a typical Chinese famine. The rest of the book is devoted to bitter facts and biting accusations which the author piles up against a criminally careless society.

Man requires energy to live. The sun is our only source of energy. The only way in which man can absorb the sun's energy is through the medium of certain green plants, which produce carbohydrates from water and air and soil and chlorophyll and sunlight. If these plants disappear, man will starve. Gold will not feed him, nor any wealth printed on paper, nor coal, nor steel, nor press-agents, nor prayer. The Land is the only real wealth, and it is only negotiable when it is treated with care and respect. Farmers are the fashioners of man's sustenance, and the rest of us are parasites upon their labor.

Vogt invokes the grim specter of Malthus, the 18th century English clergyman, who pointed out that food supply is increasing in arithmetic progression (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), and the population in geometric progression (1, 2, 4, 8, 16). In an Era of Exploitation it has become fashionable to deride the Gloomy Curate by pointing to seemingly inexhaustible resources and to the blessings of birth control. But the resources are not inexhaustible; we are about to scrape the bottom of the barrel. Erosion has reversed the arithmetic progression, and

sanitation has removed major controls from the geometric progression. And as for birth control, Vogt points out that the people who need it most (the indigent millions of India, China, and certain Catholic countries) cannot afford it, do not know how to use it, and/or have moral scruples against it.

At present there are 2.2 billion people in the world—twice as many as there were 100 years ago. There will be twice as many again in 70 years at present rates of increase. There are less than 2.6 billion acres of arable land to sustain these people, and their children will have even less land because we are washing it down the drain. One acre per person will not provide the "American Standard of Living" for anyone, not even for Americans. And yet we have promised it to underprivileged peoples as their divine right—taught them to "go awhoring after strange gods"—to adorn the altars of their expectation with golden images of the Automobile, the Radio, and the Flush Toilet, those siren symbols of a social salvation which the Land cannot provide.

Vogt devotes half his book to a detailed report on the "carrying capacity" of each of the continents, citing typical countries as illustrations. The U. S. has land enough to maintain 100,000,000 people in reasonable comfort—and our population is nearly 150,000,000! Most of Latin America is mountainous or rain forest, where nothing can be grown. The rest is overpopulated and criminally exploited. Europe contains the best farmers and good farms, and we are feeding her! Even in times of prosperity her population must depend upon import for survival—parasites upon other continents which can hardly feed their own populations. Asia is largely

unfarmed and unfarmable because of the cold North, cyclonic movements that blow Pacific moisture east, the Himalayas and their rain-shadow which extends across Mongolia. Into the equatorial regions are crowded half the world's population — up to 1000 per square mile. Africa is "the dying continent"—mostly desert and jungle; having only 20,000,000 more acres of arable land than South America, it has 70% more population; and widespread pitiless exploitation has brought pitiful erosion.

For page after horrifying page Vogt paints in stark colors the ways in which we are hastening our own doom: hog-wild free enterprise which raped the resources of the U. S. and is now turning greedy eyes to other nations; ignorant and careless farmers who rob and ruin the land — overgrazing, cut-and-run lumbering, plowing up sub-marginal land to build a dust-bowl; absentee landowners whose agents mine the soil of rich river valleys and force poor tenants onto hillsides which wash away when cultivated. He describes the sterile, sifted soil of exhausted farms, turning to desert; he points to the flooded rivers carrying topsoil to the sea as silt, which fills flood-control dams up to the spillways, chokes harbors, and causes backed-up waters to cut new channels through more rich farmland. He calls the land our "New Atlantis"—it is vanishing under the surface of the sea!

As long as the land is washing away (at the rate of 200 forty-acre farms a day in the U. S. alone), says Vogt, what is the significance of our vaunted "Culture"? Our high standard of living is a taunt or a futile dream to other nations, and a vanishing luxury for ourselves. Our recent advances in science, medicine, and public welfare have preserved countless thousands, who will beget millions, who will live in misery, and die of starvation. Our "Sanitary Revolution" is sowing the seed of our own

destruction. We give Europe a humanitarian handout, which lowers our standard of living by raising prices, which encourages more extractive farming of sub-marginal land, which sends more topsoil down the rat-hole and spawns more dust-storms, for the purpose of succoring indigent Europeans, who will survive and reproduce, which will increase population pressures, which will breed another war. Not that Vogt frowns on mercy—but he feels that "mercy" which saves thousands from misery that millions may suffer is a hollow mockery. He suggests that we should help only those nations that take active steps to control their birth-rate.

Vogt's solution is two-fold: (1) conserve our resources through research, education, and action on the land (re-forestation, controlled grazing, and constructive farming methods), and (2) reduce the birth-rate drastically through some cheap, easy means of voluntary birth-control, as well as sterilization subsidies. If these things are not done, and done within a decade, mankind may expect a crescendo of war, famine, flood, and drought. We are caught between the Malthusian millstones—less dramatic but more inexorable than atomic fireworks. The formula that spells mankind's fate may not be Einstein's $E=mc^2$, but Vogt's $C=B:E$ (the Carrying Capacity of the Land is the ratio between Biotic potential and Environmental resistance).

This book is full of vitriol and vindictiveness, but it is justifiable. A man tends to lose patience when he sees the world's salvation jeopardized by human callousness and stupidity. The Pope forbids effective birth-control on "theological" grounds, while his spiritual charges starve. 100 million people starved to death in China in the last century rather than plant grain on the graves of honored ancestors. The Tyrant Corn rules Mexico with scorpions, encouraging the birth-rate while scourging

ing away the soil. The average income in India is "just enough either to feed two men in every three of the population, or give them all two in place of every three meals they need, on condition they all consent to go naked, live out of doors all year round, have no amusement or recreation and want nothing else but food, and that the lowest, the coarsest, and the least nutritious"—and the sacred cattle must be fed and protected, while 14,000 babies are born each day!

Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" comes to mind with ghoulish impurity, viz.; yearling babies make good food and fine leather.—And Scrooge's willingness to decrease the "surplus population." Against the looming shadow of extinction, the traditional values look a little grisly. One begins to long for a Heavenly Haven, where the streets are not only paved with gold, but, it is to be hoped, abundantly lined with edible green plants, and where the Elect are guaranteed a nutritional equivalent of 3000 calories per diem per capita.

The book is good shock treatment for those whom nothing but shock will stir. It is addressed to

every person who reads a newspaper printed on pulp from vanishing forests . . . every man and woman who eats a meal drawn from steadily shrinking lands. Everyone who flush-

es a toilet, and thereby pollutes a river, wastes fertile organic matter, and helps lower a water table. Everyone who puts on a wool garment derived from overgrazed ranges that have been cut by the little hoofs and gullied by the rains, sending runoff and topsoil into the rivers downstream, flooding cities hundreds of miles away. Especially . . . men and women in overpopulated countries who produce excessive numbers of children who, unhappily cannot escape their fate as hostages to the forces of misery and disaster that lower upon the horizon of our future.

It may be that Vogt has overlooked some loopholes in man's fate: atomic energy for distillation of sea water, or reclamation or synthesis of topsoil, or acceleration of the hydrologic cycle, or of the growth process, or hydroponics with synthetic chlorophyll, or nutritional utilization of the algae in the ocean which perform 90% of the world's photosynthesis. Of course, any of these solutions will probably be so expensive as to lower the world's standard of living anyway. But humanity, or a saving remnant thereof, will probably find some solution to this problem, even as it has to others. But it will be men like Vogt (and Warren S. Thompson and Fairfield Osborn) who will awaken us to the need of a solution. If survival is a religious value, we would do well to seek out the "road to survival!"