

The International Congress of Agriculture

MEETING AT THE HAGUE

THE seventeenth International Congress of Agriculture was held at The Hague on June 16-24. Great Britain was officially represented for the first time for many years, though at recent congresses members of the Women's Institutes and the Horace Plunkett Foundation have been present. There is always a tendency in Great Britain to regard international congresses, other than those of specialists, as somewhat in the nature of 'joy-rides'. Languages undoubtedly present a difficulty that weighs more upon our people than upon Continentals, and this applies more particularly to those informal discussions and personal contacts from which those who participate in the Congress gain most.

The abstention of British representatives of agriculture from this Congress has most probably been due to the feeling that their industry is fundamentally different from the European system, in which peasant farming predominates. However, nowadays nearly all nations have embarked upon policies of control and regulated marketing, about which there is much to be heard from the Continental experiments, which aim like our own at the safeguarding of an industry ill-adapted to hold its own under modern conditions. From every nation one hears the same tale of low prices, of the inability of the farmer to hold his own against the trader or to get his products to the consumer at prices commensurate with those which he receives, and of the drift of men from the land. A 'Green International' is not possible, so diverse are the interests and the organization of the land and the farmers in different countries, but one's domestic policy is more likely to be successful if it is informed of what is going on elsewhere.

From the technical side, Holland is the country most worthy of study by the British farmer; its agriculture is highly accomplished and works under conditions of mixed capitalist exploitation and small holders, analogous to our own. Livestock bulk large in the system and the organization either of registration, disease prevention, advice, even of shows, affords us much to think about. The production of sugar from beet is higher in the Netherlands than in any other country—for the years 1926-29, 4,000 lb. per acre as against 2,500 lb. in Great Britain. Vegetable growing exhibits an exceptionally high general level of efficiency, even if some of our experts need fear no comparison.

It was therefore somewhat of a lost opportunity that British representation at the Hague Congress, except in the women's section, was still so limited. The formal opening was attended by H.R.H. Prince Bernhard and a representative of the Queen, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands and the Minister of Agriculture, the Minister of Agriculture of Italy, the president and secretary general of the International Institute of Agriculture at Rome, and representatives of forty nations in all. In welcoming the Congress, M. Colijn, Prime Minister, made a courageous speech on the necessity of breaking down the trade barriers between nations which have so often been set up in response to the pressure of particular interests. This was followed by a remarkable

demonstration, at which the representatives of one country after another affirmed that the maintenance of peace was the prime necessity for the maintenance of agriculture and indeed of the world's civilization.

Then, as is customary, the Congress resolved itself into its various committees. The first and third sections, dealing with agrarian policy and co-operation respectively, bore perhaps little upon British conditions, though the discussion on the international market for butter was of interest to the Dominions. The second section discussed education and propaganda, and the chief point raised was the importance of economic studies in the agricultural colleges as a means of preparing trustworthy leaders of opinion in these times when so much legislation affecting agriculture is being proposed. The fourth section, on plant production, produced discussions on the improvement of protein yield from light soils and on vernalization, with some reference to the recent clash between the advocates of vernalization and the geneticists in Russia. Of great interest was the account of recent legislation in Germany to restrict the number of varieties of farm crops that can be offered for sale, a restriction dependent upon an organization for testing the productivity of the immense number of varieties that are more or less in cultivation. It was reported, for example, that from the 348 varieties of wheat formerly to be found in Germany, only 11 may now be sold, with a further 34 under trial. The vexed question of assuring to the breeder of a new variety protection analogous to that of a patent was discussed at some length. If legislative control is obtained of the varieties that may be offered for sale, it is possible to secure royalties on the stocks multiplied from the original which has been duly characterized and registered, but while something is thus practicable internally, the situation is complicated by the existence of international trade and the lack of any general system of testing and registration. In the section on livestock production, discussion chiefly turned on the role of vitamins and mineral accessories, and several of the papers presented merit careful consideration.

In the woman's section the chief report had been prepared by Mrs. Haldane, on public health regulations in English villages. The role of the woman in agriculture is obviously much larger in the European countries than in Great Britain, owing to the predominance of peasant farming; hence the greater attention that is being paid to instruction in the domestic economy of the farm.

The Congress was admirably prepared and organized; before the meetings copies were available in French of the reports and of the main communications. It might, however, well be laid down that a speaker whose paper has been printed should not read it at length, particularly in a language in which he is not at home; in some sections the time for discussion was seriously curtailed by this.

The Congress was followed by excursions to the reclamation works of the Zuider Zee, the experiment station at Wageningen, and to farms representative of the milk production and market gardening industries.