THE HISTORY AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE OF THE POTATO


DR. SALAMAN, after 40 years of research on genetic, morphological, pathological, and related studies of the potato, and 9 years in the preparation of the material, presents the most comprehensive book that has been published on this subject.

He shows by the records of the ancient Peruvian pottery that the potato was cultivated as early as the second century A.D., and that it influenced considerably the art and the social and religious customs of the ancient civilizations of the Andean plateaus. He discusses the potato in pre-Spanish Peru, and by documentary evidence shows that Costellanos was the first white man to find and describe the potato and not Cieza de Leon who has for years been given the credit for the discovery. He disproves the Drake legend concerning the introduction of the potato into Ireland and presents evidence to show that Raleigh may have been at least indirectly responsible for this event.

To the potato geneticist and others interested in botanical relationships, the author's discussion of the species and the place of origin of the first introductions into Europe is of great interest. It is indicated that the first varieties to reach the British Isles belonged to the Solanum andigenum species and not to S. tuberosum, as has been commonly supposed, and that they originated in the Andean highlands and not in southern Chile or in Chiloe Island, as the Russians claimed. The characteristics of other species, early culture, preservation, and use are discussed in considerable detail.

The confusion and errors of early botanists, such as Gerard, are presented. The prejudices that attended the first introductions into European countries, originated by herbalists, medical men, and others, are described with documentary evidence to prove their existence. Many of these seem fantastic, but no more absurd than some of the notions held at present. In spite of opposition and in response to a need the potato soon after its introduction assumed a place of importance in the economic and political life first in Ireland and later in England, Wales, and Scotland.

The techniques and outstanding results are described in the account given of the efforts to produce varieties immune from or resistant to wart, late blight, and viruses. This chapter should be an inspiration and a guide to geneticists, pathologists, and agronomists, regardless of the crop with which they are working.

Of chief interest to students of politics, sociology, and economics are the 20 chapters in detail the social, political, religious, and economic conditions and changes, chiefly in the period from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. It is indicated that the potato was both a blessing and a curse to Ireland; a blessing in that it enabled the peasants the most food for the least labor of any of the crops; a curse in that the employers were quick to take advantage of the situation by paying lower wages because the workers had another means of subsistence. Then, too, the potato soon became the chief food of the peasants, and when crop failure they did in the blight years of 1845 to 1847, a large number of people died of starvation and many others were reduced to dire poverty. The author shows the important part of the potato in these cases, and points out the impoverishing acts, the dispossession of tenants, and other harmful measures might have been avoided if the potato had never reached Ireland, especially if the peasant had not been dependent on any one single food crop. One-crop farming has always been a dangerous practice. The potato, because of its qualities of large production for little labor and excellent food value, may have contributed much to the welfare and happiness of the Ireland's woes; but that it should be blamed is questionable.

A different picture is presented in the chapters dealing with England, Scotland, Wales, and the northern parts. In these accounts it is clear that the potato contributed much to the welfare and happiness of the people, as it has in many of the other parts of the world.

The chapter on The Industrial Uses of the Potato by W. G. Burton shows that a high proportion of the potatoes grown in England are used in the various industries, both for human consumption and as animal feed. The author mentions that large quantities are used for starch, dextrins, acetone, alcohol, and alcoholic beverages, and its use in the production of synthetic rubber. The techniques and outstanding results are described in the account given of the efforts to produce varieties immune from or resistant to early blight, late blight, and viruses. This chapter should be an inspiration and a guide to geneticists, pathologists, and agronomists, regardless of the crop with which they are working.

The book is a comprehensive and authoritative account of the history and social influence of the potato. It is a valuable contribution to the study of this important crop and its place in the history of mankind.