

A PROBLEM AS OLD AS NABOTH'S VINEYARD

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IN his lengthy biography of Henry George, published in 1952, Charles Albro Barker refers to a meeting between the former and the noted economic historian, Professor James E. Thorold Rogers of Oxford University. The two met during one of George's visits to the U.K. According to Barker, Thorold Rogers is alleged to have told George that "Of all the thieves in the world, the landowners of England are the worst and the most unscrupulous." These are harsh words, but it should be remembered that the history of land tenure up to (and including) the times when both George and the controversial Oxford Professor were in their prime as outspoken critics of historic landlordism, was bitter. Much of this resentment arose from the long history of rapacious landlordism; the social and economic consequences arising from the many Acts of enclosure, which had robbed the English peasant of his rights in common land; the Highland clearances which pauperised the Scottish Highlanders; and the resented absentee landlords who were a perpetual thorn in the side of Irish rural politics.

However much we may deplore the failure of successive British governments to bring about a just system of land tenure, it would be an unnecessary exaggeration to describe contemporary British landowners (of whatever hue) in such blunt and uncompromising terms as were ascribed to the late radical professor.

The rot, which has bedevilled the many attempts to put right a long and nagging injustice, probably began with the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of the Tudors. Thorold Rogers, whose monumental researches and painstaking studies culminated in a scholarly economic history entitled *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, did not mince his words as may be seen from the following quotation: "I contend that from 1563 to 1824, a conspiracy concocted by the law and carried out by parties interested in its success, was entered into, to cheat the English workman of his wages, to tie him to the soil, to deprive him of hope and to degrade him into irremediable poverty."

Rogers was not alone in holding such partisan views, as readers of *Progress and Poverty* can testify. Way back in 1776, the sage of Kirkcaldy, Adam Smith, noted in *The Wealth of Nations* that, "As soon as the land of any country has all become private property, the landlords, like all other men, love to reap where they never sowed, and demand a rent even for its natural produce." Though George found the economic answer to the riddle of land and rent from Ricardo's theory on the subject, and wished to collect land rent for public use—in the process freeing the land for everyone's benefit and use—I have long considered that his affinity to Adam Smith was greater than to Ricardo. Whereas Smith and George brought to the subject a humanity and the spirit of progress if only mankind would obey the laws of nature and use their common sense, Ricardo, like

Malthus, wrapped the subject up in gloomy forebodings, giving to economics the reputation of being the dismal science.

Over the past hundred years or so, many books on the land question have been written, such as Graham Peace's *The Great Robbery* and J. L. and Barbara Hammond's *The Village Labourer*. William Ogilvie, Thomas Spence, Patrick Edward Dove and the great naturalist and contemporary of Charles Darwin, Alfred Russell Wallace with his book *Land Nationalisation, Its Necessity and Its Aims*, all wrote well and eloquently on the iniquities arising out of land monopoly as it affected the society they were familiar with.

A new and welcome addition to the subject has recently been published.* It is essentially a history of the many attempts at land reform over a period of some seventy-five years. The author is Dr. Roy Douglas. I have no hesitation in recommending it as essential reading for those who see in sound land reform a fundamental requirement for the free and liberal commonwealth. Rent is the great equaliser. Its appropriation by the community leaves men and women free to enjoy the fruits of their efforts and skills. There can be no lasting justice in a world where one part of humanity controls the land, exacting tribute from the rest of mankind as a condition whereby they may have use of and access to nature's broad acres, without which human progress and development are inhibited.

In the eighteenth century owning land was synonymous with political power and influence; the landed aristocracy were virtually unassailable in the security they enjoyed in influencing the conduct of the nation's affairs. The landless majority were reduced to being hired servants without security or rights. To be a peer and member of the landed aristocracy was to be above the law to the extent that one could not be arrested for debt, have one's estates impounded, or be made bankrupt. The privileges they enjoyed were legion. The middle of the nineteenth century has seen the abolition of the Corn Laws, the adoption of free trade and the rise of a prosperous middle class of businessmen, tradesmen and the professional classes. Their influence in the House of Commons was growing with the widening of the franchise. In spite of the increased influence of the rising middle classes, land monopoly was still a powerful interest to be reckoned with. To be landless and poor was

**Land, People and Politics*, Roy Douglas. Allison & Busby, 239pp., £6.50.

the lot of a growing proletariat who were for the most part descendants of forebears who had been dispossessed of their common rights in land.

That such conditions no longer prevail is not to infer that a solution to the land problem is no longer to be the subject of reform. More people own some land than ever before, but the basic problem of "freeing the land" remains.

Roy Douglas has provided a most useful account of the many attempts to reform the law as it affects our rights to land; and how, in the process, this altered the pattern of British politics, the conflict being often bitter and violent. It was not unknown for troops to be called in aid of the civil authorities. More than any other event, landlordism probably brought about the ultimate breach between Ireland and the rest of the British Isles. The first serious attempt to bring about comprehensive land reform was Lloyd George's "People's Budget" of 1909, whose provisions allowed for a valuation list of all land in the United Kingdom. The taxes to be levied on land were derisory and of little significance, but the prospect of a nationwide land valuation would have provided the essential foundation for the eventual collection of economic rent for the public purse; also, assuredly, it would have led eventually to a more just distribution of land among the people of Britain.

It is a sad reflection of the times we live in that the growth of the welfare state and an increasingly state-managed economy have so obscured the problem posed by the land question, that the subject is nowadays treated as a minor irritant requiring legislation to facilitate the *dirigiste* mania for centralised economic planning. The Liberal Party, who once placed land reform (together with free trade and the balanced budget) as the cornerstone of their economic policy, have reduced the former to a parochial debate on financing part of local government expenditure through site-value rating. Useful though such a measure would be, it would fail to perform the important function of freeing land so that none should be called upon to pay tribute to landlords for the right of access to land, while retaining the equally important right of all to enjoy security of tenure to such lands as they may need for the purpose of work, pleasure and a home.

Over the past fifty years we have abandoned free trade; balanced budgets are for nostalgia only; and a sound land reform policy is as far from being achieved as ever, the present Government having

saddled the people of Britain with a bureaucratic nightmare of monumental proportions—the Community Land Act. To add insult to injury and stupidity we have attempted to inflate our way out of every self-imposed economic difficulty.

Attempts to persuade politicians (and others) that land-value taxation is the only viable means of bringing about universal rights to land are parried with the age-old objections of the sanctity of private property, and the injustice it would cause to "widows, orphans and pensioners." In fact, the same objections which greeted attempts to abolish slavery! It leaves one with the despairing thought that the greatest obstacle to human progress is not merely ignorance and unsound thinking, but that vast phantom army of widows and their many dependents.

Most attempts at social and political reform have a regrettable tendency to be over-concerned with reconciling sectional "interests" and the preservation (or creation) of group privileges. The welfare state, which has dominated British politics these past seventy years, has bypassed intelligent economic reform, providing in its place the subsidised council house and a great deal of ill-conceived rent control legislation, thereby creating a new privileged class—the protected tenant, euphemistically known as the "sitting tenant." It is this kind of sophistry which constantly irritated and angered the late Thorold Rogers, who exclaimed, when ending a lecture to his Oxford students: "Governments have been too weak or too dishonest to be sensible, and are consequently crippling the intelligence of those whose affairs they administer, by pandering to the foolish, dangerous and wholly unjust dictum, that private interests are public benefits."

By way of conclusion, Roy Douglas would, no doubt, concur with a view expressed by the late Professor C. R. Fay in his classic work *The Corn Laws and Social England*:

"Where the rent of land for a particular use in competition with other uses is being considered, then rent is part of the cost of production; but where land as a whole is being considered, it is not: it is then emphatically a result and not a cause: it does not enter then into the cost of production. When Adam Smith was writing, the land of England, and of Scotland even more, was very much in the making. There was no suggestion of finality. Land usance, therefore, did not suggest exclusive monopoly. There were hundreds of square miles **awaiting enclosure* and cultivation, even in island Britain. The sore spot was *not the scarcity of land* as a whole but *the desire of enclosing landlords* for coveted pieces—a problem as old as Naboth's vineyard." [Naboth was an Israelite whose vineyard was seized by King Ahab after Naboth had refused to sell it and had been stoned to death on the orders of Jezebel the King's wife (I. Kings 21.)]

*My italics.