

◀including the conflict between his idea of limited government and the democratic will, and the contradiction between his consistent free market liberalism and his proposed welfare system.

The events surrounding the bank of North America make for a fascinating read. After helping establish the bank, Paine finds he has to fight against the withdrawal of its charter because it was not happy to accept the States' paper money. The birth pangs of paper money and inflation, and how silver coin was worth more than its paper equivalent, help to explain why Paine disliked currency laws and thought those who suggested them deserved the death penalty!

The final chapter on whether Paine's idea of welfare payments are a right or charity, demonstrates a good understanding of the arguments. The crux of it hangs on the ethics of property rights. Paine called landlords "drones" and it is his attitude to natural rights which clinches the argument that land is a different kind of property which we all 'own' during our lifetimes. His welfare proposals are thus payments in lieu of everyone's stolen natural inheritance, financed by a land tax and inheritance tax, such taxes being perceived as a valid weapon against imbalances of power.

Paine was a moral man, he liked freedom and equity, he disliked monopoly, whether political or economic, and he believed in mankind's underlying goodness. One of his best-known quotes is "where knowledge is a duty, ignorance is crime". His Rights of Man was hugely popular, it was publicly read and then banned. His effigy was burnt, his ideas caused riots and followers were transported. He was revered and hated – forced to flee England but regarded as a patriot by some.

John James

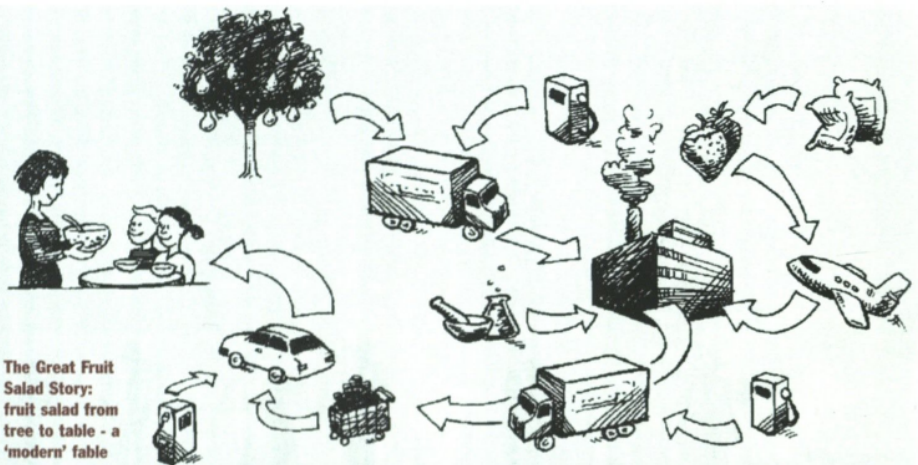
Primed to explode

The Little Earth Book by James Bruges

Alastair Sawday Publishing, Bristol, UK,
2000
£7.99

THIS BOOK IS unique and extraordinary: not because of what it says – but because what it says has not been said this way before. The book is a world issue primer.

The Little Earth Book is an attempt to crystallise concern about our treatment of the world's people and environment. In 49 chapters of two or three small-format pages, he gives a précis of each of the most pressing global issues of our day. Each is based on his reading of an authoritative source. The



The Great Fruit Salad Story: fruit salad from tree to table - a 'modern' fable

chapters deal with everything concisely from the shortage of fresh water, to organic production; from the human food chain to commercial eugenics; from citizen's income to international debt. Bruges presents the reader with a set of vignettes of our times.

Throughout the book, Bruges returns to the issues of international relations and indebtedness. He manages to communicate the complexity of the international bind within which we're held.

He wonders what wealth really is: "A sack of grain is real and can be considered as 'wealth'" he tells us "But it rots. It rots or is eaten by weevils, and eventually turns to dust – that is the second law of thermodynamics. But if you talk about 'minus' one sack of grain you are using a mathematical concept: it is virtual (ie conceptual) wealth, or debt, and it can grow *ad infinitum*. The ruling passion of economists and politicians is to convert wealth that perishes into Virtual Wealth (debt) that lasts (unlike grain) and even grows." Turning wealth into debt, Bruges says, is a "logical nonsense which can only lead to catastrophe in nature and the breakdown of society".

On bio-patenting, the author discusses the appropriation of the neem tree's properties (see Essay, p14). Bruges despairs at the emerging situation, declaring "the arrogance of this new colonialism is breathtaking". But seeing reason for hope, he wonders whether "India might declare, unilaterally, that the fundamental elements of life are global commons and ought never to be up for sale to private interests" so becoming the global "power-house of the life sciences".

His worry of "sale to private interests" misses one important point: such resources can't be sold – since they were not originally owned. These resources are appropriated by private interests, like Native American lands

were. As American poet Wendell Berry says of his own farm's ownership, "the record is confused. The first recorded sellers [were] never recorded as buyers".

Bruges chronicles the 1898 "great American idea" of "odious debt" – debt cancellation in mitigating circumstances – and the failure of its application in the modern world. As he points out, the rule today is that "whatever happens, whoever is at fault, the wealth of western creditors must be protected and enhanced".

The story is told of Third World debt as viewed from the North. But far more importantly, Bruges tells us about First World debt as viewed from the South. Basing what he says on Christian Aid's Who Owes Who, Bruges argues that the facts of international debt are not of Southern indebtedness to the wealthy North, but of the reverse.

"The First World has a massive debt to other nations for depleting the natural capital of the world," Bruges says. But "this debt is fundamentally different from the Third World debt". It isn't based on "artificial money": it's based on "real and finite" things like "the ability of the atmosphere to keep the earth pleasant and warm". The argument is that the North has taken more than its share of the earth. Bruges believes the Third World could have a case in law against the North. The mechanism for collecting that debt – though Bruges fails to say so – is resource rents.

Bruges states: "The First World minority must humbly ask the majority nations of the Third World to share the damage it has caused. The Third world is asking for confrontation to be put behind us."

The World Disasters Report 2000 calculated that the wealthy North has amassed a climate debt of \$13,000 billion – more than five times the total Third World Debt. So – who does owe who?

Peter Gibb