

**G**RAHAM MOSS, architect, philosopher, planner and "rural land use consultant" has advanced the important process of ministering the propagation of enlightenment to the masses on the land question, by judiciously assembling pertinent facts and figures concerning land use and abuse in the British Isles.

This book is an invaluable addition to the armoury of necessary facts which all those interested in the land question will require to have at their fingertips in the coming days of political/economic confrontation.

The motives of Mr. Moss no doubt are of the highest, his diligence, care and research beyond reproach, his concern, intelligence and industry cannot be gainsaid; yet in the end his book is a grave disappointment.

Why should this be so? Setting aside some minor but infuriating errors, the mis-spelling of Lewis Mumford as "Munford" (an error which increasingly crops up, especially in recent architectural books), the attribution of "you never had it so good" to the wrong election (1959, Mr. Moss, *not* 1963!), all these can be forgiven. What is not forgivable is that in a survey of 230 pages discussing the vital question of land dereliction, inadequate attention is paid to the underlying and fundamental issue, namely the legal basis of British land tenure, and its causal connection with land dereliction and high land costs.

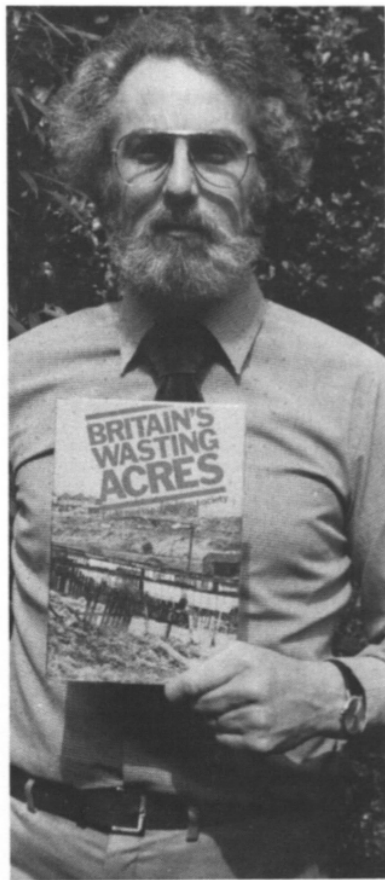
In a tantalising reprint of an 1880 party poster for site value taxation, the author does allow a suspicion to dawn that in political economy it is perhaps the real question of *rent* which determines the problems of land just as in the real world it is the question of wages which determines the problems of labour and the real question of profit which determines the problems of capitalism. But rather than face this real problem and confront the crucial land issue, Mr. Moss retails and re-runs the old bromides of an over-crowded small island, energy crisis, pressure/size of population, lack of resources and political ineptness.

These stale bromides of the conservationist lobby are, however, totally belied by the very statistics that Mr. Moss has so painstakingly gathered. As he himself shows, and as can be easily demonstrated by reference to land statistics, Great Britain is *not* an "overcrowded" island. Just because there is approximately one acre per person, this does not mean that we are under-endowed with land. 80% of the land

# Bromides And Landmines Beneath Britain's Acres

*Britain's wasting acres*, Graham Moss, Architectural Press, 230 pp., £13.50.

BY HERBERT MEYER



● Graham Moss

surface of Great Britain is in fact sparsely, if at all, inhabited. Of the total population of 55m., barely 2.5m. are scattered over 47m. acres, while almost 53m. are concentrated into less than 9m. acres. It is not quantity of population but pressure of population that is the major issue of land distribution in the UK, both of people and of inherited wealth.

In the face of inner-city vandalism, terrorism, muggings, crime, alienation and poverty, Mr. Moss calmly points to the land dereliction which is growing apace throughout the civilized world and then trots out the same old conservationist panaceas as

given by the so-called experts in land use.

These panaceas are familiar friends: stop growth; give up growth; save it and conserve it; small is beautiful; back to the rural land use; use intermediate technology; proclaim reclamation and pretification; build up park spaces, adventure playgrounds and grass over the inner cities.

Mr. Moss does not or will not see that dereliction is the end result of the dead hand of rent monopolised by an oligarchy of absentee landlords, both in rural situations and in urban inner city areas.

Even in this very year, even with the unique "advantage" of untaxed farmland, the British farmers have suffered a catastrophic 50% decline in their earnings. Yet while in the House of Lords those landed gentry representing the farm interests moan about the low prices obtained from farmers, farmland prices which reflect capitalised rent are at astronomic levels. Is it really true, as the contented rentier owners of broadacres tell us, that "there are just too many people," or is it more likely that there are in fact too many rich landlords? If 80% of the nation's land in the UK is in the hands of less than 3% of the native population, is it likely that the few will be able to continue to rule the many as the few get richer and fewer while the many get poorer and more?

In 1981 as in 1880, idle land means idle men, and as more and more land is made idle by its monopoly control so the unemployment queues grow. If "labour isn't working" it is because idle land is enclosed while idle men are shut out. It is a pity that with all his erudition and knowledge, Mr. Moss cannot see the land for the fields nor hear the fatal time bomb that is quietly ticking away beneath those broad acres of the British ruling class. In the words of Christopher Brasher:

"The problem will continue as long as land is allowed to be treated like any other commodity, to be bought and sold, sometimes without thought to its future or regard for those who live and work here. Surely it is their land to be cherished and protected from speculators."

Those are the greatest speculators who speculate that the lords and lairds of the land cannot and will not be changed.