

# The lessons of William Ogilvie for Scotland's Parliament

DELEGATES at the Scottish National Party conference in September were reminded of the seminal study by a radical Aberdeen University professor, William Ogilvie. He placed the land question at the heart of political debate with his essay *Birthright in Land*.

According to one delegate, David Gorman: "With land value taxation William Ogilvie will live again, for it is community ground rent that gives us back our birthright in land. Tax based on the value of land must surely be a practical and better way to raise revenue for a country being re-born in a new millennium".

Ogilvie's essay has just been re-published\* to inform the debate on the land question in Scotland. *George Morton, one of the contributors to the new book, writes:*

PROF. William Ogilvie, of what is now the University of Aberdeen, published his essay in 1782, during the turbulent time between the revolutions in America in 1776 and France in 1789. Such was the radical nature of the Essay, and such was the politically enslaved nature of Scotland at the time, that Ogilvie was forced to publish it anonymously.

Towards the end of the last century, at a time of substantial agitation for land reform in Scotland and Ireland, based largely on the Single Tax movement led by the American, Henry George, Ogilvie's Essay was republished by an Aberdeen lawyer, D.C. MacDonald, with a preface and extensive biographical notes.

Several years ago a group of Scottish Georgists became interested in the idea of republishing MacDonald's *Birthright in Land*. The Scottish Ogilvie Society was formed and publication took place just prior to the referendum in which three-quarters of the voters endorsed the establishment of a Scottish Parliament.

The new version of *Birthright in Land* is intended to be fully relevant to the country's semi-independent future, but

the publishers are in no doubt that readers will be fascinated by the Essay, with Ogilvie's of necessity diplomatic wording, contrasting with MacDonald's fiery eloquence and fascinating contributions on Adam Smith, Robert Burns and others.

The book includes contributions by Dr. Roger Sandilands of the University of Strathclyde, and the book's principal producer, Peter Gibb. Peter stresses the worldwide relevance of the Essay in "A Global Green Tax?"

Out of the Scottish Ogilvie Society has now emerged the campaigning organisation Land Reform Scotland, recently

present, for example, at the annual conference of the SNP. Given the appalling concentration of land ownership in the Highlands and the associated misuse of land on, for instance, the so-called sporting estates, the issue of land reform is potentially explosive and Land Reform Scotland intends to be agitating for the Georgist solution. This year has seen a dramatic and most welcome change in the political landscape, with the election in May of a Labour government after 18 years of Conservative

landlord-friendly rule, plus the recent overwhelming majority at the referendum.

Land Reform Scotland's main task in the immediate future will be to influence the Scotland Bill, to be placed before the UK parliament, so that the tax-varying powers can be used in a Georgist way. It is also important for Georgists everywhere to combat vigorously the centralist tendencies of the European Union, which potentially threatens regional fiscal autonomy. Scots in particular know how damaging political union can be, the last Scottish Parliament having been blatantly bribed into winding itself up as part of the Act of Union with England in 1707, several decades before the good Prof. Ogilvie was even born!

\* *William Ogilvie's Birthright in Land*, Othila Press, London, £7.95.

**DR. ROGER SANDILANDS** writes: "A radical shift toward the finance of government through the collection of community created ground rents would permit far more than the 3p reduction in the tax on earned incomes to which the Scottish Parliament is to be restricted according to the Labour Government's White Paper. The parliament should demand the right eventually to scrap the iniquitous income tax, and prove critics wildly wrong in their claims that it will use its power to vary income tax only in the upward direction.

"The value of Scotland is the rental value of its land. As Scotland's 'rebel professor' William Ogilvie recognised as long ago as 1782, it is a value created collectively by the community and as such is the people's birthright. Will the Scottish Parliament seize its opportunity to restore the land to the people by taxing the land and not the people? Will it thereby show the people of England the way forward for them, too? Or will it merely continue to administer, but at great additional cost and bureaucracy, the same unjust fiscal system developed on its behalf at Westminster since 1707?"