



A Mental Marathon

Robin Raynham

THE ORIGINS OF VIRTUE

Matt Ridley

Penguin Books, £8.99

HENRY GEORGE was right on at least two counts according to the conclusions reached by the author of this truly prodigious work, even though its subject matter is not supposed to be economics! No less than an ambitious and determined attempt to elucidate the evolutionary mechanism by means of which human beings have come so generally to practice altruistic forms of behaviour, it inevitably expands to encompass, to some degree, some aspects of the subjects of government and political economy.

Unfortunately (and despite the author's accomplished writing style), it is not an altogether easy book to read or to comprehend properly (especially if, like me, you are not versed in the tenets of modern evolutionary biology). Mr. Ridley does not actually define what he means by "virtue", although the inference is made at one point that he conceives it to lie in "pro-social" behaviour. (It is not clear if this means behaviour that is 'pro' the existing social order or 'pro' its beneficial development; two things which may well be in direct opposition.) It turns out that one (implicit) core theme of the book is that of the, currently very significant, issue of environmental sustainability, and how to ensure that our race adopts forms of behaviour that result in it.

In chapters 1 to 8 the author discusses the behaviour of a varied selection of types of mobile life forms, starting with ants and working all the way up the evolutionary tree to the dolphins and then to ourselves, attempting to explain the functional 'rationale' behind the way all these creatures behave and the factors that will have caused that behaviour to develop.

There is a great deal of material here and, there being no way all of it can be summarised briefly, I am not going to try. Chapters 9 to 12 inclusive deal with subjects that are closer to our own interests, however, including War, Trade, Ecology and Property. The author identifies the habits of conformism and what he calls "groupishness" as conducive to war, stresses the importance of trade as having the opposite effect and as being the primary stimulus of both ancient and modern economies, is disparaging about governmental administration of law and is enthusiastic about Ricardo's (counter-intuitive) Law of Comparative Advantage. In regard to ecology, he thorough-

ly debunks the popular idea of the 'noble savage', living in harmony with nature and respecting the environment, and illustrates that doing so is not an instinctive or innate tendency in our kind.²

But then he comes – with evident reluctance and distaste – to the conclusion that only property³ rights (either communal or individual) can give rise to practices that will ensure the desired environmental sustainability. (If what Dr. Stephen Covey⁴ calls "the production/production capability balance" is to be maintained then somebody has to have an interest in maintaining it: the owner of the capability is the only one likely to.). As nobody really owns the earth, this seems to me to be a somewhat sobering conclusion but let us hope that the Georgist paradigm of state administration of it on behalf of the community (effectively a form of communal ownership) will adequately serve if properly carried out.

In chapter 13 the author comes, rather suddenly, to his conclusions, remarking that he has argued that "there was morality before the Church; trade before the state; exchange before money; culture before Babylon; society before Greece; self-interest before Adam Smith; and greed before capitalism", some of which thoughts I find encouraging.

It is in his penultimate paragraph that he comes to the first of his conclusions that is essentially similar to that of Henry George's thinking – that the power and scope of the state

should be reduced to the minimum⁵. But he then comes up (entirely without giving any justification for it) with the curious statement that governments should "wither into their minimal function of national defence and redistribution of wealth" – entirely omitting any mention of the primary function of civil government, that of instituting and maintaining within its realm a proper system of law!⁶

His final conclusion is to stress the importance of encouraging social and material interchange between equals, almost paraphrasing George's words of more than a century ago that association in equality is the essential precondition of human progress.

The author has obviously put a tremendous amount of work and thought into this book and my overall impression is that it has been written by a brilliant (if slightly misguided!) friend who, if he were only to study and comprehend Georgist principles, might well become one of us. As reading it effectively constitutes something of a mental marathon, however, I suggest that, to ensure success, you should oil and polish up your intellect carefully before attempting to do so!

REFERENCES

- 1 Altruistic: having regard to others. (Dictionary)
- 2 Evidently this may be another possible reason for the decline and disappearance of some previous civilisations, an alternative to the one highlighted by George, and the inference resulting from the stated insight must therefore be that, if we are to achieve a state of environmental sustainability on the earth, this can only come about as the result of the implementation on our part of a conscious and deliberate decision to do so.
- 3 Of course, he uses the term 'property' indiscriminately, as most people do, not being aware of the distinction we make between the terms 'property' and 'land'.
- 4 See "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by S.R.Covey, Simon and Schuster.
- 5 Except that this was a premise, rather than a conclusion in George's case, based on grounds of economy, whereas Mr Ridley's conclusion is arrived at on the score of efficacy.
- 6 I don't agree that the redistribution of wealth is a proper function of government either!

Need for a template to guide reforms

Roberto Silva

BRAZIL

Jan Rocha

Oxfam, £6.95, \$9.95

ANYTHING written by Jan Rocha is guaranteed to be informative. She has worked as a reporter for the BBC and British newspapers for 30 years, covering the Brazil beat with distinction. Her work includes studies for

the Latin American Bureau.

The monograph for Oxfam offers a succinct survey of a nation in turmoil. The problems of a divided society can be traced back to the mal-distribution of land which

Continued on following page ➔

Land & Liberty Winter 2000

Wisdom from the Iron Lady of the Rocks

Julia Bastian

BIRTHRIGHT IN LAND BY WILLIAM OGILVIE AND THE STATE OF SCOTLAND TODAY

Shirley-Anne Hardy

The Peregrine Press, £11.95

Main stockist: Thins, Perth, Scotland

IF YOU SHOULD go walking along the Craigower Track, near Pitlochry, you may read in your guidebook about a local lady: "Mrs Shirley-Anne Hardy of Rock Cottage ... noted for her radical views on land use and land ownership ...". By some of her African friends who came across her writings on land reform, she is known as "the Iron Lady of the Rocks".

Mrs Hardy, herself a landowner, has spent many years planting indigenous trees over her 1.25 acres. Her hillside is now "forest land" while in the garden of her shepherd's cottage she cultivates herbs, salad crops and food for wild birds. She practices sustainable land use in its most practical form.

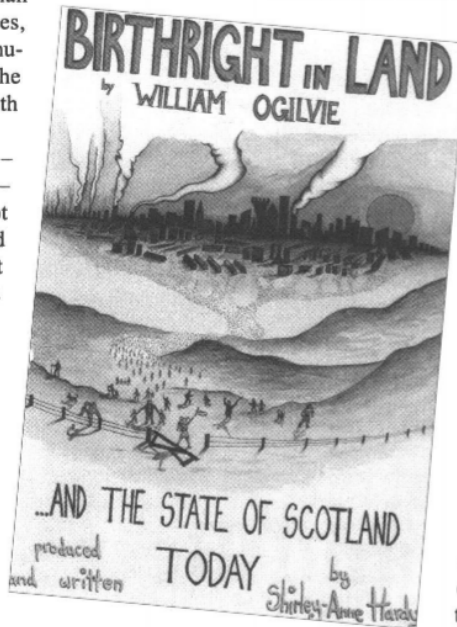
Her book is divided into three parts. Of particular importance is the essay on property in land written by William Ogilvie, accompanied by her commentary which links the 18th century writer to our own time. By analysing the work of others long forgotten, Mrs Hardy will renew interest in Natural Law, and ideas buried in the past which could now open up vistas for progress. Ogilvie is shown to be a pioneer in the social, economic and ecological spheres.

Another hero is William Wallace, tenaciously researched and passionately reported, including how the film "Braveheart" came to be made. Wallace cleared the English out of Scotland – with little help from Scottish nobility

– and freed Scotland from alien domination. All over the world he has been an inspiration to freedom fighters; not for nothing are there more than eighty place names, sculptures and monuments, to associate the deeds of Wallace with the landscape.

Part II – "Signposts"

– explores the concept of community and the re-empowerment of the people. Topics investigated include the different qualities of water, floods, genetically modified organisms, drugs, cyberspace, types of energies, agriculture, racism and much else. These discussions bring to light how so many problems facing mankind stem from society's original subversion of the Law of Rent. An easily understood definition of this Law, which is timeless and universal in its application, is



provided. It removes the cruelty of land monopoly and restores the equal availability of land to all who require it for their livelihood, and it ensures that land is used and not sold for profit.

The work of Viktor Schauberg, for example, has been an important signpost for the health of the planet. He dedicated his study to the nature of Water and the water cycle of the Earth in its completeness. He has shown the high price we pay for ignorance which has already led to so much destruction of the environment.

Likewise the work of Dr Weston Price, a dentist, whose books on nutrition illustrate how social and environmental ills are traced back to society's original subversion of the Law of Rent. These, and other luminaries included in this book, emphasise that neither land nor people should be treated as commodities, and it is this idea that must be addressed if mankind is to stand back from self destruction.

Mrs. Hardy, a true Scotswoman, is rightly concerned about the state of Scotland today. She sets out the correspondence she has had with The Scottish Office regarding their land reform policy; although the new Scottish Parliament has discussed land reform and consulted about it widely, they have failed to understand the bigger picture.

The final section is called Kaleidoscope. It contains a remarkable collection of writings that enhance and extend all that has gone before. There are reprints of articles,

including some from *Land and Liberty*, from *Progress* (the Georgist journal published in Australia). These supporting documents on justice and liberty draw together extracts from newspapers, cartoons, poems, drawings, and much fascinating information on subjects of burning interest to everyone who cares about the health of the planet.

Shirley-Anne's erudite anthology is the culmination of some 40 years of research into the laws of social justice since she was first alerted to the work of Henry George. Her book will help to make Georgism relevant to the issues of our time and certainly provides a blueprint to guide Scotland towards economic and political freedom.

And since it will appeal to every ordinary member of the reading public with no special knowledge of Ogilvie, or Georgism or the Land Question, for them it could become the ideal Christmas gift.

☞ Signed copies available from Shirley-Anne Hardy, The Rocks, Pitlochry, Perthshire, Scotland PH16 5QZ

Brazil

Continued from previous page

crucified indigenous tribes and prevented the more recent settlers from gaining decent livelihoods by working the vast fertile hinterlands.

Rocha explains that Brazil's system of tenure was designed not to serve the interests of farmers; it was to be a supplier of raw materials to the Portuguese Crown. So the colonisers divided the territory into 13 "captaincies" for the King's soldiers and their henchmen. Sugar and coffee was produced from plantations worked by slaves.

In 1986, the 20 biggest landowners still owned estates covering a territory four times larger than the state of Rio de Janeiro of approximately 100 million acres. Meanwhile, according to the landless rural workers' movement (MST), 4.8 million families need land. At the end of last year, 60,000 families

lived in squatter camps – while vast areas were either vacant or underused.

Brazil has one of the most active direct action peasant movements. Land squatting is a regular occurrence, with landowners fighting back with the aid of hired gunmen. This study does not offer a coherent solution to this problem. Oxfam itself has not formulated a template for legal and institutional reforms that could guide countries like Brazil or Zimbabwe, to enable those nations to re-base their development programmes in the direction of economic efficiency and social equity.

Even so, the Rocha volume is value for money. It provides an authoritative survey of the facts which social activists need if they are to develop a coherent reform that would be fair to everyone in Brazil.