

Poverty – one of Britain's traditions

ALTHOUGH the British people may claim to have been the pioneers of parliamentary government Malcolm Hill suggests that Britain is patently not a democracy. He gives a detailed account of the gaining of civil freedoms during the long struggle with the monarchy, the development and limitations of Parliament and the growth of our legal system with the many rights now protected by law.

However he argues that sovereignty is shared briefly at certain moments by the monarch, often by the Prime Minister and Government, sometimes by the media, occasionally by sportsman or popular heroes but seldom by the people who have their one moment of choice at a General Election. "Sovereignty in Britain," he says, "is splintered between many and people suffer – as a consequence there is ineffective government."

The first half of this book is devoted to the story of the fight for civil liberties, the fight against slavery and arbitrary arrest and the fight for free speech, fair trial, and so on. The second half of the book tackles the area where Malcolm Hill believes our fundamental failure to be a real democracy lies, namely our lack of economic liberties. As he says, "the abolition of civil slavery did not mean the dawn of liberty ... Just as a bird needs two wings in order to fly freely in the sky, so an individual needs both civil and economic freedom before he can realise the liberty which is a birthright bequeathed by Nature".

Geoffrey Lee

SLAVERY IN A LAND OF LIBERTY

Malcolm Hill
Othila Press, £25

One of his main criticisms is of the gradual erosion of the principle of free trade which from the 1920s has led Britain into a system of state control and protectionism. The European Union, he claims, has protectionism in "its foundation and in its intent, in its operation and in its want of vision."

Malcolm Hill's other main criticism, and its most important one, is of the existence of mass poverty. We live with the politics of mitigation of poverty with no attempt to find its causes and eradicate them. "Britain", says the author, "has endured mass poverty for six centuries, without break. Indeed it may be said that one of the longest traditions in British history is poverty, which prevents an able-bodied individuals earning a livelihood sufficient to support themselves and family throughout their lives or live an independent life."

He agrees that poverty is disguised by the ownership of cars, computers and colour tele-

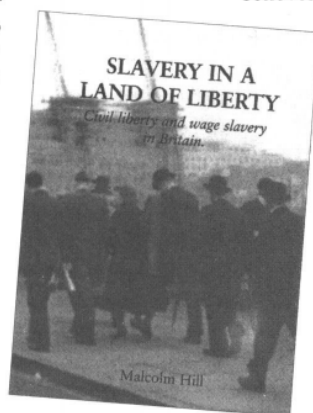
visions and, of course, it is not to be equated with the starvation associated with third-world poverty. But nevertheless it has to be mitigated by the welfare state which has to fund education, health, housing, pensions and social security which if individuals received their full wages could be paid for by themselves. The causes, Malcolm Hill argues, go back to the first land enclosures in the 13th-century and the gradual separation of man from their common ownership of land. The solution, he believes, would be to "convert the

value of land into public property by taxing it on its annual rental value: it should be collected as public revenue."

The concomitant of this would be to lift taxes off incomes and production so that everyone received their full wage and could support themselves and their families. "When the British eradicate wage slavery, they will ask themselves why it took so long to achieve what Nature

intended for them at the dawn of human existence."

Why indeed? This important book will provide an historical and practical tool for any politician with the will to try and lift the burden and give Britain its economic freedom.



Highland Betrayers of the Clans

Sandra Sinclair

LAST OF THE FREE

by James Hunter
Mainstream, Edinburgh, £18

JAMES HUNTER is a distinguished historian of the highlands and islands of Scotland, whose cause he champions. In this book he removes the rose-tinted glasses to offer an appraisal of the last 1,000 years, and he does not have pleasant things to say about the home-grown chiefs who were supposed to serve their clansmen.

In fact, says Hunter, Scotland's history should not be viewed in simple terms of a small country's struggle against English oppression. Rather, he takes to task the chiefs and kings of Scotland whom he characterises as villains rather than the heroes of nationalist legend.

Before yielding its authority to Westminster

in 1707, the Scottish Parliament was double-crossing the people in the highlands. The single most heinous betrayal, states Hunter, from today's vantage-point, was "the evolution of the region's clan chiefs into landlords [which] can be seen as constituting the single most defining episode in the entire post-medieval history of the Highland and Islands".

Why? The chiefs, in their arrogance as landlords on the English model, cleared the fertile valleys of the clansmen, driving them to the barren edges of the Atlantic and beyond. But what were they after? This is not made explicit in Hunter's analysis, but it is the central question in terms of defining solutions that meet the com-

plex social, economic and ecological challenges of the next millennium.

The chiefs wanted to grab – or, if you prefer, privatise – the surplus income from the land. This they had traditionally held in trust for the social welfare of their communities. They undertook the project of shearing away the social obligations attached to the disposal of rent, which they wanted for the exclusive purpose of financing the culture of an aristocratic lifestyle. That necessarily altered the culture of Scotland, and excluded the majority.

Today, the Parliament which was restored to Scotland last year needs to unravel the last millennium in its finest detail if it is to formulate corrective policies that enable the people to democratise their culture (which includes their politics). This cannot be achieved until the public understands that the net income of society – the rent of land and natural resources – is the material base of the culture of an inclusive society. This reality has to be made explicit and formulated in constitutional rights. James Hunter has provided a valuable service by collating in one readable volume the high and low points of the past 1,000 years. But this work is seriously impaired by the failure to trace the financial link between the majority who were regressively dispossessed, and the privileged minority who were progressively enriched.

Land & Liberty Winter 2000