

**L**AST year marked a little-known bicentenary in the U.S. – the Land Ordinance of 1785. This was the first land reform of the new nation, and together with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, had lasting consequences. They were adopted by the short-lived Continental Congress, which was superseded by the Federal Constitution (1787-89), and were surely its most important actions.

Some of the thirteen original states on the eastern seaboard had laid claims to lands to the west and after some bickering relinquished them to the national government. In relinquishing Virginia's western lands in 1784, Thomas Jefferson drew up a plan to survey and settle them. The Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 were modelled on this plan. The land was divided into rectangular sections with townships of 36 sections or six miles square. The revenues from the central sections were to be reserved for public education.

The land was sold to prospective settlers for between \$1 and \$2 per acre. This seems little enough, but in those days it was a lot of money. Much land was bought up by speculators who reaped profits from the settlers coming in. So both land reform and land speculation were part of U.S. history from the beginning.

Still, by one means or another, the westward movement began which was to populate the country from coast to coast. And the Ordinances set precedents for the formation of states, observed into modern times (the latest being Alaska and Hawaii).

**T**HE GOAL sought by Jefferson was the settlement of lands by small working farmers and the avoidance of land monopoly. But this cannot be achieved by fiat. A better grasp and application of Physiocratic principles (with which Jefferson and his colleagues were familiar), which included a single tax on land, would have made the goal attainable.

Actually, there was a national land tax in the days of the Continental Congress, but the power of vested interests was too strong, and in the transition to the federal government, the land tax got lost in the shuffle.

Still, the need for land reform was recognized by responsible leaders throughout U.S. history – the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Reclamation Act of 1902 were examples. Some of this is outlined in *Land Reform, American Style*, edited by Charles C. Geisler and Frank J. Popper (Rowman & Allanheld, New Jersey, 1984). After a brief historical survey, the book deals with present-day land problems.

Most of the situations presented by

various authors deal with agricultural land – a persistent tendency when “land” is discussed, as though cities are not built on land. But even in this more limited context, the harm wrought by land monopoly is evident. Family farms are going under, big corporations do gigantic farming, much farm land is owned by non-farming absenteees as an investment.

Some of the authors give in to the contention that family farms are “inefficient”, not reckoning that they are mostly working the poorest land and that their enemy is not technology but land monopoly. Given fairer conditions, small farmers could cope in a free market. Who would not prefer fresh produce brought promptly to market, to the mass-produced, chemicalised, artificially ripened and stored stuff in supermarkets?



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Appalachia – a large area in the eastern U.S. – is dealt with. Much mining as well as farming is done in this region, and absentee landownership, undertaxation of land and widespread poverty are conspicuous.

**A**N INTERESTING chapter is “Land Reform and the Church” by John Hart. Statements by Catholic Bishops, especially those working in rural areas, are cited. Among the principles they invoke are: “The land is God’s. People are God’s stewards on the land. The land’s benefits are for every one.” The work of other Christian denominations on land reform is also cited.

Whatever happened to the Sagebrush Rebellion? A chapter by Frank Popper, “The Ambiguous End of the Sagebrush Rebellion,” says it just ended, it wasn’t settled. The idea was to get federally owned lands transferred to the states which were to make them more accessible for use.

But after taking a second look at the lands and the responsibilities, the states backed off. Meanwhile, landowners had good friends in the Reagan administration who were willing to grant them choice parts of the public domain on easy terms. No need to rebel!

One interesting point made in the book is that “land reform” was previously thought to be something needed for the Third World; now it is recognized that the First World needs it, too. Not that the Third World’s land problems have been solved – in fact, says the book, landownership is more concentrated now in the Third World than before World War II. This situation surely deserves a book by itself.

**T**HE COMMUNITY Land Trust movement is examined by John E. Davis. Land, mostly in rural areas, is acquired by these trusts and leased to settlers in an endeavour to “re-allocate equity of land”. The movement has been influenced by Henry George in that rent is collected for the community – but there are differences: more control is exercised than George might have advised under his “single tax”; and one of the purposes of the trusts is to preserve rural areas and hold off urban development, which is not quite a Georgist goal.

Toward the conclusion, the book finally does pay some attention to cities, but disappointingly, discussing mostly condominiums, rent control, zoning, etc., which have more to do with buildings than with land. Hardly anything is said about land value taxation as a reform to restore rights, promote development and make our cities liveable. A pity, because a discussion of “land reform American style” ought to have more to say about the land reform of the American Henry George.

Still, it is promising to see a call for more attention to the land. For years we have been told that “land doesn’t count any more.” Now it is more clearly seen that we cannot sweep land under the rug! A greater focus on land – even if it begins just with agricultural land – can bring to light problems that can best be dealt with in ways that prominently include land value taxation.