

REVIEW OF THE BOOK:
Land: How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World
By Simon Winchester

Reviewed by
Edward J. Dodson, M.L.A., May, 2021

The fact that this book by Simon Winchester has been well-received and praised by reviewers is one more indication that interest in *the land question* is on the rise. The author has produced a detailed yet accessible study of how we humans have thought about nature and over time embraced the idea that groups and individuals (at least some groups and some individuals) have a rightful claim to exclusive control over portions of the planet we share. The evidence he presents describes how what amounts to tribal identification and hierarchy within this tribal identification have dominated and still dominate our relations with one another and with the planet, even as tribes of people have over the centuries adopted new socio-political arrangements and institutions.

Winchester takes us on an historical journey around the globe, providing what most readers would conclude are important details regarding the migration of people from one part of the globe to other parts. For several thousand years now groups of aligned people have fought one another for control of territory and natural resources. With enough time every tribal society succumbed to the establishment of hierarchy and the empire-building ambitions of those who gained and held power. At the same time, history has been unkind to those outmatched in numbers, in the arts of conducting warfare, and in their adaptations to newer technologies. Most important of all where *land* is concerned, Winchester tells us, was putting pen to paper. First came treaties, then came expulsions. And then:

“The newcomers, eager legally to secure the taking of the abandoned native lands, introduced one formality that their ... predecessors had never known: the title deed. Such a document ... soon became an essential for demonstrating that one was actually the rightful owner of a piece of real estate.” [p.18]

And, with the first issuance of title deeds to individuals and to private entities, the treatment of nature as our common heritage was systematically and deliberately undermined.

Settlement in one place also created the need to establish boundaries, to support agriculture, to identify and provide secure access to locations for commerce, residence and governance. And the need to establish boundaries stimulated the introduction of new methods, new tools and new techniques for measuring and mapping the planet. Of course, at the end of every conflict over territory, borders were redrawn and maps revised. When acquiring more territory proved difficult or impossible, resources have been mobilized to add to the livable and usable land area by pushing back the sea, building levees, draining swamps, or terracing mountain sides. Nowhere has more been done to create what nature has failed to provide than in The Netherlands:

“The Netherlands is essentially an enormous muddy delta, an amassment of flatness at the mouths of three great European rivers, the Rhine, the Meuse, and the Scheldt.” [p.107]

In response, the citizens of The Netherlands have over many centuries contributed the money to fund expansion of the nation’s dry, livable, developable land. Their plan contained one fundamental principle that, on the surface, distinguishes what has occurred in The Netherlands from that which operates in most other societies:

“The state may have paid for all of this new land to be created, but it was not the state that ever intended to possess it. ...It is a philosophy underpinned by a spirit of cooperation and compromise and a determined lack of evident privilege and separateness, and a concomitant belief that all of the population could and should share in such rewards as state-directed projects might ultimately generate. ...New land would be owned not by the monarch or by the faceless official body that engineered its precipitation from the sea. Rather it would be owned by the best and the brightest and the hardest-working of the people who expressed their keen desire to own it.” [pp.118-119]

Now, as someone schooled in the science of political economy as presented in the writings of Henry George, I point to the unfortunate fact that those who obtained title deeds to this newly-created solid ground (essentially, by George’s definition, a *capital good*) were not required to reimburse their fellow citizens who were taxed in order to produce this highly productive capital asset and protect it from destruction by a returning sea. Considerable insight into what constitutes balanced and sound public policy is likely there for anyone who cares to study how revenue is raised to pay for the public goods and services brought to this part of the nation’s solid ground territory. My own cursory research indicates that government in The Netherlands does capture some land rent but does so with no consistency across the nation. Moreover, as does almost every other government, all manner of incomes, assets and commerce are subject to taxation that imposes *dead weight loss* on economic output.

Simon Winchester ventures briefly into the realm of political economy as he recalls the observations made in the seventeenth century by William Petty. One of Petty’s important insights, Winchester suggests, relates to the operation of land markets:

“[L]and’s intrinsic value would also increase by the simplest principle of supply and demand, in that land was limited in supply but the population that wanted it would always be guaranteed to increase, such that the land would become ever more in demand, and so command higher and higher prices at sale.” [p.133]

Of course, as Henry George explained, land would yield a sales price only if the community or the society failed to charge the holder of land the full potential annual rental value of the land held. Reading Petty directly from available sources, it is clear to me that he realized that the natural rent of land represented the value of a bundle of advantages associated with a location. Yet, for reasons he did not explain, he looked to

other forms of income to fund the costs of government. Winchester offers no judgment on either the equity or the economic efficiency that results. In what is a very brief and passing reference to Henry George, he describes the great political economist as “*the celebrated inventor of the radical idea of the land value tax.*” [p.393] Winchester adds a bit more commentary in a footnote, indicating some interest in and respect for George’s line of thinking – perhaps to be explored at some future date:

“In his wildly popular polemic *Progress and Poverty* (1879) the writer and political economist Henry George proposed that all taxes be abolished except for that applied to the potential rental value of unimproved land – what many have since described as the ‘perfect’ tax. Henry George had an enormous following in America in the late nineteenth century and his funeral in New York in 1897 drew the largest crowds ever then seen in the city. Few present-day economists could ever imagine such a send-off; yet his legacy has never found favor in any advanced country on earth, despite George’s firm belief, supported by great numbers of thinkers, that since land is a near immutable gift of Nature, logic dictates that it is the only possession that should be subject to taxation. *Too difficult to administer* is the usual argument against.”

Winchester may or may not be familiar with the wider history of the movement initiated by Henry George and the publication of *Progress and Poverty*. If the United States was George’s homeland, his message found a most receptive audience in the British Isles, where the effects of centuries of rentier privilege and landlordism were every day experienced by the majority of the population. Born in England, Simon Winchester has intimate knowledge of the nation’s history of the enclosures and the private appropriation by a few privileged families of the nation’s rent fund. He writes:

“As to how such families might have acquired their land, the stories are generally befuddled by antiquity and legend and have acquired a patina of long forgotten mythology. ...These are the ‘old’ families of England, the landowning classes, gentlefolk untouched by titular reward, generally unwilling to be involved in such vulgar matters as politics or – heaven forbid – *trade*, which might taint their social sanctity.” [p.160]

What he states here rather overstates the case, I submit. After all, Britain’s landed aristocracy has for centuries sent the adult males of its most influential families to serve in the House of Lords, where they have well served the interests of their rentier and aristocratic class. The era of the sharecropper or tenant farmer may be mostly gone, but there is, as Winchester observes, huge incomes derived from what nature provides:

“Anyone who sits on enough land is likely, thanks to the providence of geology, to have something of value underneath.” [p.161]

Winchester then decides the time is right to offer the sentiments expressed by the great twentieth-century economic icon John Maynard Keynes. Would Keynes be satisfied with the public collection of rent to diminish the destructive effects of Britain’s rentier privilege?

“[Keynes] cared little for the gentry’s argument that they were custodians of the land and creators of the landscape that was, in Britain at least, so uniquely and transcendently beautiful... Keynes retorted only that he thought euthanasia the best solution for the gentry, the country all the better for getting rid of them.” [p.162]

Some pages later he introduces readers to the statement made by a young Winston Churchill while campaigning in 1906 for a seat in the House of Commons, a statement few readers have likely encountered if they have little or no knowledge of the early Liberal party support for Henry George’s systemic reforms and the campaign to see them implemented (significantly funded by the American Joseph Fels, who turned back the history of migration by becoming a citizen of Great Britain). Churchill managed to say a great deal in just one sentence:

“Land which is a necessity of all human existence, which is the original source of all wealth, which is strictly limited in extent, which is fixed in geographical position – land, I say, differs from all other forms of property in these primary and fundamental conditions.” [p.180]

As those of us familiar with the history of the Liberal party, opponents of systemic reform to Britain’s land tenure and public revenue structure proved too strong. Churchill carved out his own, unique positions of political statesmanship as defender of Britain’s imperial landed empire. Meanwhile, as the twentieth century progressed and long-standing empires began to dissolve, concern for how the land was being cared for began to grow in country after country. Increasingly, the interests and views of the earliest occupying peoples found a new level of public support. As everyone everywhere struggles to respond to the consequences of climate change, ancient knowledge of how to work with nature has acquired a new importance. A case in point, Winchester observes, is how the aboriginal people of Australia used controlled fires to remove the underbrush that, left in place, provided the fuel for the recent fires that roared across the Australian landscape. He provides many examples of how intentionally or not the heavy human footprint is being reduced around the globe.

There are many more stories contained in this book than I can cover in this review. If this book was available online in a searchable format, almost any term one might enter in the search line would yield results. The Index is eighteen pages long. I expect that this book will provide numerous opportunities for me to quote from Simon Winchester in my own writing. We are rewarded by the extensive research and travel undertaken to bring these stories to us. I hope the book will stimulate for many years to come the badly needed public discussion of *the land question*.
