perceives as an important element in fiscal reform. He links the taxation of land and natural resources with eco-taxes and Citizen's Incomes. This he presents in Chapter 16: A New Social Compact, originally published in 1996. By this time he was convinced that a major source of the world's problems was a tax system that penalised people "on the value they add, not on the value they subtract". James Robertson insists that there is much work still to be done, but he has the bit between his teeth. He has become one of the most articulate campaigners for justice, and this volume traces the evolution of his thinking over the past two decades.

In a strong sense, the book is implicitly an indictment of those of us who were the keepers of a knowledge which ought to have been elaborated in a form which influential activists like Robertson could have grasped while he was still working within the Cabinet Office. Decades of opportunity have been lost. L&L

The Repeal of the Corn Laws 1837-46

Malcolm Hill

The Turgot Press, £1.50.

Review by ROY DOUGLAS

THE REPEAL of the Corn Laws in 1846 is one of the most famous events in the 19th century, yet many people do not appreciate its full significance. The lessons remain with us to this day. That makes Malcolm Hill's booklet the more welcome.

The background is the intense poverty of the British working class in the first half of the 19th century. Great numbers of people really were at the margin of subsistence, and the price of bread, their staple food, could literally determine whether they survived or not. Bread prices, in their turn, depended on the price of corn.

The Corn Laws had been enacted in 1815, when the special provisions for agriculture which had been made to meet the emergency of the Napoleonic wars suddenly became inappropriate. The Corn Laws provided an embargo on importation of corn when the domestic price was below 80 shillings a quarter. This figure was seldom reached. So, for practical purposes, foreign corn was shut out of the country. The Corn Laws were later modified by application of a "sliding scale". Imports were no longer absolutely prohibited, but were subjected to a duty which varied according to the domestic price.

The Corn Laws had been applied in order to benefit "agriculture". But what was meant by agriculture, and whom specifically were the Corn Laws likely to help? Certainly not the landless farm labourers. What of the farmers? The great majority were tenants, and farm rents were negotiated annually. When corn prices were high, farm rents rose. When corn prices fell, so did rents. Plainly, the beneficiary of high corn prices was the landowner.

Enter cotton trader Richard Cobden. In the late 1830s, he organised the Anti Corn Law League which commenced a huge campaign of lectures. Cobden was elected to the House of Commons in 1841. The greatest problem which the League faced in its early days was intense and widespread suspicion about a new and unfamiliar idea.

The Anti Corn Law league was a model of political organisation. It raised money on what was, in those days, a massive scale, by canvassing subscriptions and by fund-raising activities. It sent out lecturers throughout the land. It produced great quantities of literature, meeting and confuting all arguments of the Protectionists. At last Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel became convinced of the force of the argument. As Malcolm Hill tells us:

"After one speech Peel crumpled his notes and turned to Sidney Herbert to say: 'You must answer this, for I cannot'."

In the end, external events gave victory to the Free Traders. Cobden had correctly predicted that: "three weeks of showery weather when the wheat is in bloom or ripening would repeal those Corn Laws."

That is not to say that events could not have turned out differently, if the League had not done its work. In Ireland, where the yoke of the landlords was so heavy that people could not afford to buy corn, even without tariffs, a million perished in the Great Famine. Historians of continental Europe still describe 1848 as 'the year of revolutions'. Without repeal of the Corn Laws, Britain could have had a Famine, or a revolution, or both.

Cobden triumphed. No government, whatever the wishes of its leaders, dared restore the Corn Laws. In the next few years, Free Trade was applied not just to corn, but to nearly everything else as well. Yet Cobden himself lived to see that Free Trade was not enough. At Rochdale in 1664, in the last great speech of his life, he told his constituents that:

"If you can apply Free Trade to land and labour too ... then, I say, the men who do that will have done for England probably more than we have been able to do by making Free Trade in corn."

It is appropriate that Free Traders and Land Taxers of our own time should draw the lessons which Cobden drew; and Malcolm Hill's book will help them to do this. L&L