

By ROY
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Lily-livered legislators

and fritillaries unforgivably frittered away

A GOOD book on the land question in a modern context has long been required, and Marion Shoard has made a partly-successful attempt to fill this gap. The approach is nothing if not comprehensive: indeed, one of the most serious criticisms is that it attempts too much, and might be more effective if confined to a somewhat narrower field.

It begins, as comprehensive works usually do, with a historical survey, describing the process by which our present system of land ownership developed. In the various parts of Britain, as in other countries, land was originally regarded as fundamentally different from chattels: something essentially common to the whole society.

For a variety of reasons, and in a variety of ways, the differences between reality and personality gradually became blurred. From that point, the road was open to those extremes of wealth and poverty which, with occasional interruptions and intermissions, persisted right down to the 19th Century, and leave many vestiges to this day.

In a sense, all that is old hat to people seriously interested in the land question; but in another sense the story can never be told too often for the enlightenment of people who do not fully appreciate the differences between land and other property. Even dedicated land reformers will find much to think about, and useful examples which show just how it all happened.

What may perhaps come as something of a surprise is the extent to which the direct, as opposed to the indirect, anomalies and injustices of our land system persist to this day, in spite of all the economic, social and

political changes which have occurred in the last centuries.

Marion Shoard provides a striking and informative analysis, naming some of the people who still own enormous tracts of Britain, showing the sort of wealth which derives from that kind of ownership, and also demonstrating the enormous power over other human beings which, even to this day, attends land ownership. Let those who think that land reformers are overstating their case, or solving a problem which no longer exists, try to answer this author.

Another aspect of this book which is particularly important to

the modern reader is the environmental consequences of our land system throughout the ages, but particularly in the last few decades. This really deserves a book to itself. We all know about the loss of the common, and the "greater villain" who stole it from the goose.

For the past century and a half, too, people have been deprecating the loss of rural land to buildings; but one of the author's most striking observations comes quite late in the book, where she discusses land planning legislation of the late 1940s:

"Farming and forestry were given special exemption, mainly

MARION SHOARD: THIS LAND IS
OUR LAND: THE STRUGGLE FOR
BRITAIN'S COUNTRYSIDE
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to a severe skills shortage and is seriously inhibiting economic growth.

"Government — both local and national — has tried to hide this truth behind a mask of complacency. This report shows that there must be an urgent response from government and from planning authorities if the children of South-East families are to be able to have decent homes, and if South-East businesses are to be able to attract the skilled workers they

need to flourish. Currently those workers are finding South-East house prices unaffordable."

The study entitled "House Prices and Land Prices in the South-East — A Review" is available from BEC Publications, Federation House, 2309/11 Coventry Road, Sheldon, Birmingham B26 3PL at £10.00 including postage and packing.

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because they were not at that time considered damaging. Now it is clear they are doing far more harm than any building activity . . ."

Many of us still don't really think of things that way, but it is demonstrably correct. Lump together all the built-up areas, along with their gardens and their roads, and they could still be fitted into a good-sized English county. Throw in all the effluent they produce as well, and the effects are deplorable, but not irremediable.

What has happened to the remainder of Britain — the rural bits where, 40 years ago, Attlee's government and nearly all of its critics as well, could tacitly regard the activities of the farmer and the forester as generally beneficent?

Even in those days, some people shed a few tears about the serried ranks of the Forestry Commission's coniferous woodland, but scarcely anybody got upset about farmers grubbing up hedges and draining ponds or wetlands. Until quite recently we actually paid them good money from the taxpayer for doing such things, and called it "improvement".

Now look at Britain in the late 1980s! Look at the effect of our "improvements", along with the fertilisers and pesticides which have been spread on our crops. We wiped out the Large Blue



● Marion Shoard

butterfly shortly before we issued a postage stamp to commemorate its existence.

The great crested newt, which before the war schoolboys all over England used to collect, now requires (and has received) legal protection in order to enable it to survive — because so many of the ponds where it lived have been filled up.

The nightjar, whose eggs were collected for food a couple of centuries ago, is now on or over the edge of extinction in large parts of Britain. There are innumerable examples of that sort of thing with all kinds of wild life.

Ninety-five per cent of our hay meadows, Marion Shoard tells

us, "with their characteristic constellations of yellow flags and buttercups, fritillaries and cowslips, early purple and green-winged orchids, ragged robin and meadow-sweet have been subjected to agricultural 'improvement' since the war. Most of them now consist simply of cereals or perennial ryegrass sown as a monoculture."

Many counties have lost half or more of their Ancient Woodland in the last fifty years. Along with this irreplaceable heritage of natural environments and the great assemblies of creatures which used to live there, we are fast losing the footpaths and rights of way which used to give us access to them; and Marion Shoard is able to show that the process is sometimes tied up with the position of great landowners as leading figures on local authorities.

Land reformers ought to give a lot more attention to this sort of thing. We do no good by pretending that these problems don't exist, or that they will all go away if we free our trade and tax our land values — important and necessary as these reforms most certainly are.

IT IS unfortunate that Marion Shoard is on less sure ground when she makes proposals for the future than in her devastating analysis of the past and present.

Land Nationalisation she rightly dismisses. In the end she arrives at a system of land taxation which is designed positively to encourage environmentally useful activities, while financially penalising those which are deleterious. She also discusses the Swedish system of *Allmansrätten*, or general right of access to the countryside, and plumps down strongly in support.

What is really missing in this last part of the book is that very welcome feature which characterised the great bulk of it: the close analysis, the detailed comparative study. Marion Shoard may well have the germ of an idea which might, with substantial modifications, command support. The case, however, is not adequately made in this book.

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erty prices within the zones have risen to absorb the amount of the tax relief. Michael Ward, the then Chairman of the Greater London Council's Industry and Employment Committee, said in September 1984 that there is an inverse relationship between rents and rates: "The lower the rates, the higher the rents."

He added: "Land prices in the Isle of Dogs have been pushed up, because of the rate exemption, to as much as £150,000 per acre for industrial land and £400,000 per acre for office development. Cuts in rates end up in primarily sub-

sidising landlords with windfall gains, rather than the industries they are meant to encourage."

The fact that commercial rents are depressed by large increases in local taxation also illustrates that rent is the residual beneficiary in the distribution of wealth. The more that is extracted from total production on a site, for whatever reason, the less there remains for the landlord.

But while one may readily concede the principle in such examples, is it true that *all* taxation is ultimately at the expense of rent? This is a question that must await further research.