

Across the great divide

Soil and Soul

by Alastair McIntosh

Aurum Press, 2001

£12.99

Soil and Soul is a book about the earth and people. "It is about the interrelationships between natural ecology, social community and the human spirit." It is a book which purposefully "moves away from the mainstream trunk of western culture and goes out on a limb". It's there because the end of the limb is "where the blossom is".

The book is in two parts. Part one speaks of McIntosh's early life. Indigenous Childhood; Colonial World tells us stories of his upbringing on the Hebridean Isle of Lewis, and while this may read like an autobiography "we come to understand that in fact it is not". We see that the stories have a greater purpose. George Monbiot (see interview p8) in the book's foreword says McIntosh draws on these experiences "to develop a radical politics of place".

The second part of the book – The French Revolution on Eigg and the Gravel-pit of Europe – tells us of some of the causes and the action in which McIntosh has been involved. These "point to a Celtic truth about identity, which is actually a deep human truth: A person belongs inasmuch as they are willing to cherish and be cherished by a place and its peoples". McIntosh tells us he is seeking the decolonisation of the soul, and that he hopes to contribute to this by going "heavy on the issues, but gentle on the people".

Soil and Soul is a book which beautifully reveals how good life inspires just cause and right action. It confirms this to us for our own selves that we might understand afresh what our own experience is for.

In some sense the book begins a new social dialogue for us. It also gives us some of the practical elements we will be needing to develop that dialogue. Land reformers acquainted with the author or his work will not be surprised to hear him advocate a type of community land ownership that is growing in Scotland today – one that "allows for entrepreneurial freedom within a framework of mutual accountability and democratically controlled planning safeguards... coupled with land value taxation".

It is a way forward which McIntosh believes will mean "landlordism in rural and urban areas alike could be brought into check, turning market forces against themselves". This, would mean "the lairds

could, thereby, progressively finance their own clearance". Monbiot judges that "this is a world-changing book, one of the most important I have ever read, which will transform our perceptions of ourselves, our history and our surroundings... It is a first step towards the decolonisation of the soul".

Little more need be said. Monbiot is right. Read this book and get decolonising.

Peter Gibb

Photography: Lucy Glover