

Land Hunger—Then and Now

LAND TENURE AND LAND TAXATION IN AMERICA, by Aaron M. Sakolski. Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, New York. October, 1957. 316 pages. Cloth. \$3.50.

Reviewed by
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This is not just another academic work for a limited audience of scholars. It is a document of timely interest to all thinking people for it bares some of the root causes behind the present social and political upheavals that threaten peace.

Boldly inscribed across the jacket of this book might have been the words: *What happens when a land hungry, freedom seeking mankind is confronted with the unique opportunity to convert some 3,000,000 square miles of the world's choicest real estate from a vast wilderness into a great and cohesive nation?*

Over and over in these pages we see that truth is indeed stranger than fiction. Imagine for a moment how the nation *might* have been envisaged by the early settlers. And then think of the present—a land of many freedoms and opportunities, but withal, one where the most fundamental right of man—free access to the land—has not been realized.

To understand the evolution of land tenure and taxation in America, we need to know something about the seedbed. Dr. Sakolski gives us the European, and more especially the British, background explaining why our colonial forbears could not shake off the ingrained heritage of landlord and tenant relationships they brought with them.

"Instead of taking steps toward land reforms in a vast area untrammelled by traditions and antiquated statutes," he states, "they even attempted to return to the old systems of tenures which for centuries were

the prime causes of political and economic unrest and which still hamper human progress."

Fortunately, these efforts to turn back the clock did not succeed, and by the time of the American Revolution, some headway had been made toward a more liberal land policy.

Jefferson's credo that "as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land" found many friends. The Congress and the various state Legislatures enacted laws designed to encourage land settlement, to protect the rights of the "squatter" and to appease the land hunger of hardy souls forever pushing their way west.

Somehow these well intentioned efforts—among them the first Ordinance of 1785, the Pre-Emption Act of 1841, and even the famed Homestead Act of 1862, did not bear the expected fruit. Always there were loopholes through which slippery minds could crawl. Always there were the weak, the credulous and the unsuspecting waiting to be shorn.

Speculation in land, a practice which made its appearance early in colonial history, continued to flourish. Town jobbing became one of its most lucrative forms. When the railroad and industrial interests reached for their slice of the public domain, they walked away with far more land than they could swallow. That excess was disgorged to provide construction capital and to fatten private pocketbooks. Here was the fuel on which land speculation thrived. The discovery of gold in California and oil in Texas brought tidal waves of fortune hunters to the scene and in their wake, the ever present opportunists.

"Those who refuse to study history are condemned to repeat its mistakes," said Santayana. Dr. Sakolski has made U.S. history vivid and meaningful for anyone with even the most casual interest in the land question.