

# Scotland's Legacy of Landlordism

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**"The immensity of the problem facing this area in Fife underlines the impotence and triviality of the Government's Land Commission."**

**I**S SCOTLAND'S feudal system holding up industrial progress? asks the *Daily Record*, Glasgow, in an article "The Kingdom on the Dole," October 10. Behind the question are some revealing facts concerning the power of landlordism in Scotland, which has remained virtually unchanged for centuries.

In the twin towns of Buckhaven and Methil, an area where unemployment is four times the national average, and where over two thousand men have lost their jobs following a pit disaster, attempts to open up employment opportunities have been frustrated by private land ownership.

The main land owner in the Kingdom of Fife is the Wemyss family, headed by Captain Michael Wemyss, the local 79-year old "laird." Thousands of acres in the county are owned by Wemyss Estates, including practically all Buckhaven and Methil's 1,382 acres.

"For centuries the Wemyss family has dominated the land holding in nearly the whole of East Fife," said Mr. William Michie, Scottish Nationalist and town councillor, to the *Daily Record*. "This century, through the sheer movement of democracy, everyone believed that the feudal land system would die a natural death. Instead we find the Wemyss control of land as tight as ever."

The Wemyss line and its estates stretches back to feudal times and the family fortunes have been founded largely on coal, the seams having been worked for nearly six centuries. Even now, after nationalisation of the mines, the Wemyss estates enjoy the profits from a private railway line which carries nationalised coal from the pits. Says the *Daily Record*: "Before 1947 not only did the estate provide the jobs through its pits but it could say 'yea' or 'nay' to housing and other social projects affecting miners and their families because of its land interests. After nationalisation it lost the coalfield, but it has continued to keep a grip on land development and use. That is still the crux of the issue. At the same time, the Wemyss interests have continued to make money from coal—due to ownership of the private railway line."

The National Coal Board refuses to state the contract terms it has with the private railway company. "We are under no obligation to give details of a commercial matter," said their spokesman. Figures of from 6d. to 1s. 6d. a ton have been frequently mentioned by long-time miners.

The town council has experienced considerable difficulty in trying to meet Captain Wemyss and in negotiating for the acquisition of land needed for local development. He has declined to permit the building of a sewage works

on his land at Cairney Hill, and erected a 200 foot chimney stack in the path of a new road designed to by-pass the town centre, thus defeating the purpose of the road, which since the 1930s has had a half-mile gap in the middle of it. The council wanted land outright for houses, but was told it could only have it on feu (perpetual ground rent). Certain corner sites were kept back for future commercial development.

The town council lost when it planned a tidal swimming pool on the beach, only to discover that Wemyss interests owned the beach. "Shortly after the last war," says the *Record*, "the council used compulsory powers to acquire land near Byron Street in the middle of the town. They were immediately legally halted by a court interdict from Wemyss Mineral Concessions Ltd.—a Wemyss interest they had forgotten about!

"The Wemyss grip on the town is still emphasised by the considerable sum paid by the town council to Wemyss Estates as feu duty in respect of the majority of 3,500 council houses. At the same time the vast bulk of the town's 3,000 private house occupiers also pay feus to the laird, while his Wemyss Development Company Ltd. owns rented property in the burgh . . .

"Only this year, Wemyss Estates sent a letter to the town informing them that they proposed to take back 363 square yards from a site at Aberhill, on lease to the town as a play area, so that it could be leased separately as a petrol station."

An American firm with plans for a factory to produce steel pressure vessels negotiated for thirty acres of land, but unsuccessfully. Wemyss Estates were not prepared to

## RESOLUTE AND TENACIOUS, STOICAL AND SUFFERING LANDLORDS

**T**HE landed gentry and their relations and associates have swallowed with stoicism drastic cuts in their former standards, and by their tenacity and continuing contribution to the vigour of rural society have confuted the old-time radicals who regarded them as little better than parasites.

Devotion to the land and resolution to maintain family traditions impel them to work longer hours and to suffer worse conditions than many of their traditional social inferiors would dream of tolerating.

—Max Nicholson in *The System*  
(Hodder & Stoughton, 1967)

part with their land on conditions acceptable to the firm.

The *Record* quotes Provost Robert Gough: "A feudal type system is an anachronism to present day living. A town such as Buckhaven should never be placed in a



situation whereby its townspeople are dependent for their social living and their livelihood, even their education, on the goodwill of a land owner and companies which belong to him. As a socialist and as a Christian I have always believed that God gave the land to the people, and that it should be used by the people in their best interests."

Of course, one does not have to be a socialist to be-

## Agricultural Land Prices — Distortion and Privilege

**A** 500 ACRE agricultural estate bought for £44,000 in 1951 could be sold for around £125,000 today. The owner of 4,000 arable acres is now a millionaire. Land is the country's most rapidly appreciating asset. It has bettered industrial ordinary shares in recent years as a hedge against inflation . . .

About a third of all tenanted farm land is now owned by landlords such as the Church Commissioners, insurance companies and colleges, who are attracted by the land's appreciating value.

Of course, there are other factors behind the staggering increase in prices apart from the estate duty rebate and inflation. The supply of land is limited and shrinking: amenity and sporting attractions play their part; there are taxation concessions for maintenance and repairs; possible future value as building land when prices could be boosted ten- to twenty-fold; sheer speculation; and past boom conditions in the national economy where gains might be re-channelled into farm property . . .

No one today can afford to ignore the return from land. The death duty rebate, however, cannot be relied on for all time. To many it reeks of privilege, and mutterings demanding its removal, together with agriculture's total exemption from ordinary rates, can be frequently heard. Land ownership is probably at a cross-roads.

David Campbell in *The Times*, October 16.

**L**AND has always been regarded as "safe." This is true in the sense that it is a physical asset which cannot vanish overnight, and it makes land attractive as an investment at a time of uncertainty in the future of the economy. While the return has always been low, it has

lieve that "God gave the land to the people." Nor has the demand for equal rights to land anything to do with socialism. The immensity of the problem facing this area in Fife, and other areas in Great Britain, underlines the impotence and triviality of the Government's Land Commission and makes nonsense of Prime Minister Harold Wilson's electioneering promises of the new society. Even if industry, trade, education and scientific advance were to be streamlined (a forlorn hope under present policies), the land system would still remain centuries behind the times to dog every step of real progress.

Can there be any doubt at all that if Captain Wemyss had to pay land-value taxes on his land holdings, whether used or not, it would completely change the situation in Fife and elsewhere where the need for land and the need for it at low prices dominates every problem of land use?

shown remarkable capital growth over the past thirty years. The pre-war price of let land averaged £20 to £25 per acre, whereas the same land today would sell at between £125 and £150 per acre—an increase of about six times. This bears comparison with the best equities, which until recently showed a comparable return in interest rates. The difference is that whereas equities have consistently fallen in value since the financial crisis at the end of 1964, agricultural land has maintained its value . . .

The total quantum of agricultural land in this country diminishes year by year as a result of the demands made by other users, such as urban development, gravel workings, roads and airports, to mention a few. Moreover the land taken for these purposes is, as a rule, the better agricultural land and not the mountains and the moors which go to make up the greater part of the land designated as agricultural. This has resulted in a scarcity value for agricultural land in those parts of the country where development has been most rapid.

Finally, now that there appears to be a real possibility that we shall enter the Common Market, it is worth noting that the price of agricultural land of comparable quality on the Continent is higher than it is here. It is true that this is partly accounted for by the lower borrowing rates which pertain there, but economists take the



view that if we entered the Common Market the price of agricultural land in this country would rise once the transitional difficulties were overcome.

—G. R. Judd, FRICS, in the *Estates Gazette*, September 9.