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WILLIAM OGILVIE AND THE BIRTHRIGHT IN LAND

William Ogilvie (1736-1819) was one of the members of the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century who asserted the importance of “human reason combined with a rejection of any authority that could not be justified by reason”. He was born at Pittensear, near Elgin, Morayshire and educated at Elgin Grammar School, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities. In 1761 he was the travelling tutor to the Duke of Gordon during his tour of continental Europe where poverty was seen which Ogilvie considered to have the potential for a revolution in France. “The widow is gathering nettles for her children’s dinner; a perfumed seigneur, delicately lounging in the Oeil de Boeuf, hath an alchemy whereby he will extract from her the third nettle, and call it rent.”

After Ogilvie became Professor of Humanity at King’s College, University of Aberdeen, he was a close friend of Robert Burns who shared his belief that the miserable plight of poor working people resulted from the handicap of a landowning minority. Many of Burns’ poems were written to expose the tyranny of the landowners. Since Ogilvie was contemporary with Adam Smith, he must have met Smith and been aware of his lectures on moral philosophy. Smith’s “Wealth of Nations” (published in 1776) was a disappointment to Ogilvie in regard to property in land although he supported Smith’s proposal that the annual rental value of land is the most appropriate source of revenue for the necessary functions of government.

It is certain that Smith was coerced to delete chapters in his book referring to the landlords, as they were considered seditious and unfit for publication. Ogilvie was determined to publish his essay “Birthright in Land” in full because he refused to acknowledge the Divine Right to the ownership of land which landowners, as members of parliament, were able to enshrine in law. He condemned landowners for keeping their tenants in poverty with the collusion of the clergy who, being dependent for their living on the landowners, preached the merits of tolerating misery

and poverty on earth to achieve heavenly salvation after death and kept the poor in ignorance of the fundamental right of everyone to an equal share of the earth and its natural resources. Both Ogilvie and Burns should be lauded as advocates for the enlightenment of common people of their birthright in land. They agreed that “in no article are they more ignorant than in respect to property in land, the established rules of which are in every country accounted as permanent and immutable”.

Ogilvie produced his Essay in 1781 but it was published anonymously because he knew his life would be in danger if he was known to be its author and he was determined to avoid the censorship forced upon Smith’s “Wealth of Nations”. It was written as though by an Englishman and was not available in Scotland but it was read in England and in continental Europe. A copy was found in the personal belongings of Frederick the Great. DC MacDonald published it in 1871.

Enlighten means “make aware of the truth by education to overcome ignorance”. The majority of people today are ignorant of their birthright in land and should be informed of Ogilvie’s declaration: “with respect to property in land, that system which now prevails is derived from an age not deserving to be extolled for its legislative wisdom and is in need of reformation and improvement”. He asserted that it is inherently unjust to levy taxes on working people whilst leaving those who own land to keep any of its unearned rental value.

Most academic institutions which teach what they call economics, make no reference to the creation of Wealth by Labour and Capital using Land and other natural resources. Advanced mathematics has replaced Classical Economics and most students know little or nothing about the principles of political economy which were established by Adam Smith, William Ogilvie, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill and Henry George. 🇬🇧