

The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950

Review Number: 946

Publish date: Sunday, 1 August, 2010

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ISBN: 9780230203402

Date of Publication: 2010

Price: £55.00

Pages: 288pp.

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication: Basingstoke

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The Land Question in Britain, 1750–1950, is that rare collection of essays which is more than the sum of its parts; 14 essays by different authors, all of which connect with each other to reveal a hidden picture of a topic that has inexplicably dropped from view. An excellent introduction by Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman explains the nature of the ‘land question’ as explored in the volume: the multifaceted issue encompasses everything from allotments of land to the poor, to access to smallholdings for peasant proprietors, to reform of land laws like primogeniture, to land-value taxation on urban land. In addition, since the land question energized people in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the volume integrates the story of land reform in all parts of the British Isles.

Read side by side, chapters on Scotland, Wales and Ireland reveal that even within particular regions, calls for land reform were not monolithic. In Matthew Cragoe’s Victorian Wales, the call for land reform was divided in two. Tenant farmers, some of whose families had been living on the same farms for hundreds of years, desired social and economic reform, but political leaders sought to stoke Welsh nationalism by forging a mystical ideological connection between the soil and the Welsh *gwerin* (folk). Similarly, in Scotland, land reform encompassed not just the familiar quest of the Highlanders to remain on the land that they farmed at fair rents, but also an urban discourse of access to the land, animated by visits from Irish activists like Michael Davitt, and the American social reformer Henry George.

Juxtaposing chapters also helps to illuminate the extent to which groups that were nominally opposed to each other were united in their approval of the land question, even if they could never get past their mutual animosity in order to cooperate. As Malcolm Chase's and Anthony Howe's chapters illustrate, both the Chartists, not only in their Land Plan but throughout the tenure of Chartism, and the Anti-Corn Law League with whom they sparred, were united in a common ideology. Both believed that land should not be worked in common, but rather by small proprietors who would be responsible citizens as a result of their property ownership. From that base, democracy would bloom. In contrast, the Irish land reform movement seemed more radical because Irish tenant farmers threatened private property. They sought 'tenant right' – tenants' ability to sell their interest in their rented property (irrespective of improvements) to incoming tenants. This belief – eventually enshrined in Gladstone's 1870 Land Act – conflicted with the English notion that property rights could only be vested in the freehold owner of the property.

These strategic battles with underlying ideological agreement were not limited to outdoor pressure groups. Edwardian Unionists and Liberals differed on land-reform strategies. As Paul Readman shows, Unionists feared that Liberals would capitalize on interest in landownership by supporting nationalization by the state or local governments, and would deprive landowners of their assets through land value taxation. Animated by these beliefs, the Unionists were pushed from their traditional support of an extremely hierarchical rural land distribution system with allotments for the poor, to support of smallholdings. It is ironic that during this process, Unionists parroted the Chartist belief that widespread landownership was fundamental to democracy: in the era following the third Reform Act, democracy had come, but the land necessary to take political responsibilities seriously had not.

Ian Packer's essay shows what the land-reforming Unionists were reacting to. In addition to supporting land-value taxation, Liberal and Socialist politicians championed the purchase of parcels of land by boards of Poor Law guardians. They hoped to convert these into penal land colonies for vagrants and the unemployed. Such men, it was hoped, would both support themselves and gain training to become farm laborers. This vision clashed radically with the notion of the respectable smallholder with a stake in the hedge, and irked farmers who disliked the idea of competing on the open market with state-subsidized farms. Liberals also favored land-value taxation – taxing the potential value of the land as development land, rather than its use value as unused land. Particularly for David Lloyd George, land-value taxation afforded both proposal for financing the 1909 'People's Budget', and a platform from which to attack landlords on a class basis.

While these strategies divided Unionists and Liberals, as Paul Readman shows, both groups believed that landownership was crucial to the preservation and military preparedness of the English 'race'. Boer War recruiting had brought this issue to the fore. Thus, under the pressures of defending an Empire, both parties saw land as a factor that could physically as well as spiritually nurture British men.

Because it covers 200 years, *The Land Question in Britain* for the first time reveals the continuous stream of thought and personnel within which the currents of land-reform agitation flowed. Antony Taylor, for example, has produced an excellent chapter on the career of the radical Oxford don J.E. Thorold Rogers. Through his valedictories of his kinsman Richard Cobden, Rogers shifted Cobden's posthumous significance from free-trader to land reformer, giving land-reform a high-political ancestry. In his 1884 *Work and Wages*, Rogers also helped to legitimize the American single-taxer Henry George, by providing a theoretical rationale for George's beliefs. Claire Griffiths picks up this thread, showing that Henry George's ideas underpinned the land-based interests of MP Josiah Wedgewood, who switched his party affiliation from Liberal to Labour and then attempted to make the Single Tax official Labour policy.

Finally, this volume brings some light to the often-ignored urban land issue. Roland Quinault's essay illustrates ways in which the nature of urban landownership departed radically from that of rural landownership. The largest landowners in London, for example, were public bodies and corporate entities like schools, helping to draw criticism away from the wealthy dukes who owned vast properties in the most fashionable neighborhoods. A brief campaign for Leasehold Enfranchisement – which would have allowed

small leaseholders to purchase their lands from large freeholders – had no success. Disconnected from the energy inherent in the rural land question, the urban land question faded.

Cragoe and Readman end their volume with 1950, identifying this as the end of the land question. How did a question which had garnered so much attention since the early 19th century simply disappear? In part, it faded away because some of the major grievances of the land reformers had been resolved. As John Beckett and Michael Turner show, on the eve of the First World War, David Lloyd George was poised for political triumph with his ‘Land Campaign,’ which proposed a Ministry of Land and intensive rural development. But the war was a complete disruption, and in the four years after it ended, the market did what Lloyd George had not been able to do. With wartime price constraints gone, much land changed hands, flowing from old aristocratic families whose sons had died in the war, to the families of tenant farmers. While Beckett and Turner argue that the importance of this turnover has been exaggerated, to people at the time it appeared to mark the end of the long aristocratic and gentry dominance in society and politics.

A redefinition of party priorities provided a second reason for the land question’s disappearance. Claire Griffith documents a major Labour Party shift on the issue. Rural land nationalization had been a central tenet of the Socialist party, and along with land-value taxation on urban land, had become part of the Labour party’s program in the 1920s. Only nationalization could right the historic wrong, by which at some point in the distant past, the people had been dispossessed of their birthright in the soil. Labour leaders also proposed that land nationalization would justify public investment in rural development, in a way that could not happen if the profits from development accrued to landlords. But although nationalization made for good talking points, Labour leaders eventually realized it had too many drawbacks. These included the astronomical cost of fair compensation to landowners, and the political cost in the face of rural owner-occupiers who had no desire to give up their family farms. Even in the face of the need to maximize soil productivity during the Second World War, land nationalization never moved from policy plank to practice. By the 1950s the enthusiasm for nationalization had thoroughly receded, calling into question the extent to which it had ever been an authentic commitment.

F. M. L. Thompson, the modern dean of the land question, reunites the threads present in the volume by inquiring further into the question’s ‘strange death’. He identifies a number of factors, including: the decline of the Liberal party; more pressing challenges in the 1920s including widespread unemployment; and the departure of the Irish land question as the ‘pace-setter’ with the formation of the Irish Free State. But ultimately, for Thompson as for Beckett and Turner, the death of the land question marked a change in the British polity that was bigger than any one political party; land reformers had sought to erode the power of the aristocracy, which had happened quietly, through the power of the market.

The essays comprised in the volume are uniformly painstakingly researched, well-argued, and well-written, so that one can only critique the book based on questions that these 14 essays intriguingly raised but lacked space to answer. For example, although the authors do a wonderful job of touching on each region of the British Isles, the reader is scarcely aware of the imperial context. Except for a brief mention in Ian Packer’s essay about ‘Unemployment, Taxation and Housing’, insufficient attention is paid to emigration as a manifestation of the land question. Did the myth of free land, and then the embodiment of that myth in the 1862 Homestead Act, draw English emigrants to the United States? Or were people deterred from emigrating because they agreed with Chartist leader Feargus O’Connor that emigration was a form of government-directed exile? What variations on the theme of land possession drew the Irish to the prairies of Canada, the Scottish to the Appalachians, and the English to Australia and New Zealand?

The cultural meaning of landownership might also have fruitfully been addressed in more detail. The reader learns much about the political rhetoric of leaders, proponents, and opponents of land reform, but little from their putative constituencies. Were prospective smallholders drawn in by the prospect of political participation, or by the prospect of escaping from urban existence? Did they share an orientation toward the market, or were they seeking yeoman self-sufficiency? Paul Readman convincingly argues that landownership was promoted as a bolster to nationalism in this period: that being the case, what was the role

for the farm family? Was life on the land intended to hark back to 'traditional' gender roles, in the face of the challenge posed by the 'New Woman'? The Land-Company Chartists had described landed family existence as a bountiful utopia: in the midst of the agricultural depression of the 1870s and after, did the vision of smallholder life among boundless harvests change?

Finally, while the volume is very strong in its chronicle of attempts to theorize and politically shape land reform, it is not as strong in detailing the role that the land played in the expressive culture of the 19th and 20th centuries. The one exception is Ian Waite's study of the cultural commemoration of enclosure. He points out that while few painters captured on canvas the unfenced, undeveloped field, the examples that do exist demonstrate a certain nostalgia and an awareness of the social impact of changing agricultural methods. Although painters were encouraged to cultivate the picturesque, these landscape painters found beauty in the uninterrupted, pre-enclosure flatness of common arable or 'waste' land. Waite's study ends in 1850 and is confined to painting: it would have been interesting to compare and contrast these paintings with art celebrating the rural from later in the 19th century or in the next, or with the products of contemporary writers like the poet John Clare.

In *The Land Question in Britain*, Cragoe, Readman and their contributors have succeeded not only in putting together a polished and impressive volume, but also in defining a school of like-minded historians – one which prioritizes the land issue as a central concern of society and politics before the 1950s. Their excellent collection will have wide appeal to scholars of British social, economic, and cultural history in the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, although it does not touch on land issues in the British Empire or elsewhere, it provides much helpful background about the nature of British beliefs about land reform and strategies to achieve it, making it necessary comparative reading for scholars of land issues outside the British Isles.

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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