

## Who Owns the Countryside?

by Marion Shoard

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*Marion Shoard is based at the Faculty of the Environment, Polytechnic of Central London. She is the author of *The Theft of the Countryside* (Temple Smith, 1980)*

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*Background reading. A. Harrison, R.B. Tranter and R.S. Gibbs, *Landownership by Public and SemiPublic Institutions in the UK* (University of Reading, Centre for Agricultural Strategy, 1977.)*

*Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Acquisition and Occupancy of Agricultural Land the Norfolk report (Cmnd 7599, HMSO, 1979)*

*J McEwen, *Who Owns Scotland*.2 (Edinburgh: EusP13, 1978)*

*House of Commons Select Committee on Wealth Tax, Session 1974-75, vol 3, Minutes of Evidence (Subcommittees A and B (HMSO. 1975)*

*R Perrott, *The Aristocrats* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1968)*

*D. Massey and A. Catalano, *Capital and Land. landowriership by capital in Great Britain* (Edward Arnotd, 1978)*

The government's plans to privatise the Forestry Commission will put more land still in private hands. Big landowners now dominate the countryside. How does it affect us?

Four fifths of the land surface of Britain is countryside. And though most of us live in cities or towns, somehow many of us continue to care about the countryside and to think of it as "ours." But it isn't. Rural Britain belongs to a small clique of rich and powerful men who exploit it exhaustively for their private purposes. Increasingly, their actions conflict with the needs of the rest of the community. But they remain free of regulation of the kind which trims the sails of landowners in the built environment. Indeed, it is extremely difficult even to find out who they are.

The certificates of registration for the land of England and Wales, held at the Land Registry in London, are completely private. Even here, land is registered only when a transfer or conveyance on sale occurs-not, for instance, when land is passed down through a family by will. In Scotland. the Register of Sasines, lodged in Edinburgh, is available to the public.

## Marion Shoard:

Writer | Broadcaster | Lecturer  
[www.marionshoard.co.uk](http://www.marionshoard.co.uk)

However, it does not include all titles to Scottish land and, like the English register, it does not seek to penetrate nominal ownership vested in trusts and companies to identify the individuals in whose hands control really lies.

The landowners themselves do not give much away. For instance, Who's Who lists the charitable activities, public positions and war service of the ninth Duke of Buccleuch and Queensbury. There is no hint that he owns any land at all. Yet, with a reported 270,000 acres of Scotland and 11,000 acres of Northamptonshire, the duke is almost certainly Britain's largest private landowner.

In the absence of hard facts on who owns rural land, mistaken ideas can get about. Some people believe that most of our countryside is owned by the government or by local authorities. and is therefore under democratic control. It is true that Britain's largest individual landowner is a state agency-the Forestry Commission. It is also true that local authorities and government agencies and departments do own, here and there. substantial stretches of land. But add all these public holdings together and they make up only 13 per cent of the land

This proportion is diminishing. By 1989 the Forestry Commission should have sold off 10 per cent of its estate mainly to the private sector-in order to raise £100 million, if government plans are to be fulfilled. Other public owners-from Scotland's Department of Agriculture and Fisheries to local authorities-are also selling off land assets.

People who do not believe the countryside is in public hands often believe it has been taken over by financial institutions like pension funds, insurance companies and property unit trusts. But this is not true either. A government-appointed committee in 1978 revealed that at that time, the financial institutions owned less than 1 per cent of the land in the UK. So who are the private owners who hold more than 80 per cent of the land of the United Kingdom in their grip? In Scotland, a man called John McEwen tried to work out the answer. He spent ten years painstakingly studying maps, and calculating from them the areas and locations of all Scotland's landholdings over 1,000 acres. What he found was a land dominated by huge, privately owned estates. In 1970, according to McEwen, 87 per cent of Scotland was in private hands; and 63 per cent of the land of Scotland was privately owned in blocks of at least 1,000 acres.

South of the border; no one has matched John McEwen's efforts. We are that much more disposed to accept the landowners' own account of the position. In 1975, the Country Landowners' Association - which exists to preserve the position of landowners in England and Wales - told the House of Commons select committee examining the feasibility of a wealth tax: "There are no comprehensive statistics on the size of unit of ownership. From the available evidence, it is a reasonable conclusion. however. that few large estates in private hands have survived and, of those that have, the majority are but a fraction of their former size. Conversely, the numbers of owner-occupiers have increased. . . . Land ownership has already become more widely distributed and the process is continuing . . . Small, privately-owned businesses - and land-owning and food production are businesses - are an integral and essential part of life in this country."

The decimation of the old landed estates by death duty, and the replacement of the dukes and lords of yesteryear with a breed of small-scale yeomen farmers epitomised by Dan Archer, certainly accords with popular myth. It is easy to see why landowners would want to promote such an image of themselves. But it is not an accurate portrait.

If Britain's rural land was dominated by small owner-occupier farmers, we would expect the average size of farm holding to be low. In fact, however, at 170 acres in 1983, the average size of farm holding in the United Kingdom was large-far larger than that of any country in mainland Europe. The average size of farms in West Germany was 38 acres. The largest average size of holdings on the continent occurred in France where, at 63 acres, it was nonetheless only just over a third of the UK average size.

What is more, the UK figure would be even greater were it not for the inclusion of farm holdings in Northern Ireland. A revolution in land ownership in Ulster (as in the rest of Ireland) in the late 19th century led to the overthrow of the old landlord class. and the acquisition of the freehold of land they had hitherto rented by the former tenants. If the picture of a smallscale owner-occupied class of landowners is true of any part of the UK, it is Ulster. Here the average size of farm holding is only 60 acres, and nearly all the land is owner-occupied.

Overall, Great Britain's farmland does include many small units. In 1983, for example, 85.948 of the 216.929 of farm holdings in Great Britain (39.6 per cent) were less than 50 acres in size-three acres less than the area of Green Park in London. But add together the areas of all these holdings, and they amount to no more than 4 per cent of Britain's farmland. In other words, in 1983, 96 per cent of Britain's farmland was in holdings larger than 50 acres. Holdings ranging in size from 50 to 494 acres accounted for 48 per cent of Britain's farmland area. The 6.6 per cent of farm holdings over 494 acres in size accounted for 47 per cent of Britain's farmland.

The Country Landowners' Association says. "Few large estates in private hands have survived." This statement does not square with a 50 per cent sample survey of Britain's landed aristocrats, carried out by Roy Perrott in 1967. Perrott calculated that two thirds of the landed nobility of England and Wales, of just over 200 families, owned at least 5.000 acres each. Nearly all the estates Perrott looked at had been in the family for centuries.

Using Perrott's work as a base, Centre of Environmental Studies researchers, Doreen Massey and Alejandrina Catalano, calculated that Great Britain's titled aristocrats (including the royal family) owned 31.6 per cent of our land in 1967. There is no reason to suppose that things have changed much since then. Far from being banished from the rural scene, the long-established, titled landowning families of Britain are still a potent force in our countryside. The estates of many landed aristocrats may have declined in area since the 19th century. But the huge increases in land values this century mean their lands are worth as much in money terms as they were 100 years ago.

Indistinguishable from the dukes, marquesses, barons, baronets, earls and counts-apart from the absence of such a title and the blue blood that accompanies it-is another group of families who control holdings of rural land too large for them to farm themselves. At least half of John McEwen's top 100 landowners of Scotland fell into this category. They included the Wills tobacco family, with 263,000 Scottish acres; E.H. Vestey with 93,000 acres; and the clan chief, Captain A.A.C. Farquharson, with 119,000 acres. In Bedfordshire, for example, they would include Francis Pym MP at Everton Park, Nicholas Phillips who owns Luton Hoo, and Samuel Whitbread whose 10,500 acre estate in the north of the county is no smaller than the land the brewery's founder bought in 1795.

In the gaps left by the public owners, financial institutions and the titled and untitled barons, there are some owner-occupier farmers. There are also one or two oddballs. There is the National Trust and the National Trust for Scotland, which together own 1 per cent of the land of the UK. There is the Church of England, which has made a considerable comeback to landowning since the dissolution of the monasteries. And there is the Crown Estate, which comprises the seabed out to the limit of territorial waters, much of the foreshore and the tidal rivers, as well as much scattered farm and forest, and lucrative property in central London. This is all owned by the Queen as Sovereign; but it is administered by commissioners as a trade-off against the Civil List payments to the royal family.

Only 1/2 per cent of Britons are farmers. We do not know what proportion of the population own rural land, but it is probably around 1 per cent. This 1 per cent find themselves among the most privileged of citizens. Not only are they free to enrich themselves in the EEC agricultural gold rush. but they are also free to shape our land as they will, and to control access to it. They do not all abuse their powers. But their activities arouse ever greater anxiety in the rest of the population, among whom outdoor pursuits grow more popular, and environmental concern increases. How long before society appreciates that our land is too important to be left to the landowners?

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