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This Land Is Our Land

by Marion Shoard

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Introduction to 1997 Edition

As the third Millennium approaches, land is coming to be seen once more as a key human resource and therefore a prime focus of conflict. During a century dominated by urbanization and industrialization, it has often seemed as if the earth itself were an issue we could relegate to the past. We seemed able to concern ourselves exclusively with technologies of satisfaction which have broken free of the ancient preoccupation with the soil to which humanity's activities and aspirations seemed irrevocably tied for so long. But no longer. With the shock of a sleeper rising from a diverting dream, we are being forced to the realization that we can have no virtual existence without corporeal reality, that our corporeal selves cannot exist without a satisfactory relationship with our physical surroundings. It grows ever more apparent that to survive and fulfil ourselves we are going to have to struggle to impose our will on those surroundings in ways in which our ancestors could not have imagined.

Indicators of the reviving urgency of land questions are flashing all over the planet. The Maoris and the American Indians demand the return of their ancestral lands or compensation for their expropriation. In doing so, they highlight the tenuousness of the claims of current 'owners' to any part of the earth's surface. These formerly impregnable owners are starting to buckle in the face of such challenges. In 1975, Canada's Cree Indians were forced to accept a new treaty which gave them C\$200m but no land in settlement of their claims. Yet in 1996, after blocking roads and threatening further disruption, British Columbia's 6,000 Nisga'a Indians won the offer of 750 square miles of land, C\$190 million and the ownership of forests, oil and mineral resources from the provincial government. A further 47 groups of Indians with claims covering almost all of the rest of British Columbia's 370,000 square miles looked on with interest.

Beyond the aboriginal world, the collapse of communism after 1989 brought with it the collapse of the idea of the state taking forward the feudal baron's role as absolute landowner. Far from allowing a return to the absolute rule of powerful individuals, the liberated peoples of Eurasia have demanded a fresh disposition of their nation's land. In March 1996 Boris Yeltsin signed a decree aimed at dismantling the collective farm regime and recreating the opportunity for individual Russians to buy, sell and mortgage small-holdings. In an experimental scheme in Nizhny Novgorod, a region 250 miles east of Moscow, ownership of former collective farms has been determined in 'cashless auctions'.

Collective members have been awarded points reflecting their seniority with which they can bid for their former collective's assets. Local government and the World Bank have provided grants for what had been loss-making operations and soft loans for profitable ones. As a result, the countryside has been placed in the hands of individuals committed to successful farm production on their own account but clearly owing something to both their local community and the wider world.

In Mandela's South Africa, change in the opposite direction sees the state stepping in to take land back from private owners. The ANC government seeks to reverse the eviction of the black majority from their land and into native reserves in 1913. By 1970 the size of the average white farm was 2,470 acres while that of the average black farm was barely three. Now, the new government proposes to restore to its original owners or their heirs any land confiscated since 1913, to redistribute to the black majority 30 per cent of the country's arable land and to give tenant farmers who have lived on a white farm for more than a generation the right to buy a holding of their own. A land commission will consider claims, and the government can be compelled to compensate successful claimants by buying land for them from its existing owners at the market rate or finding comparable land elsewhere.

Nearer home we have seen the resurgence of nationalism in Europe making land the focus of some of the most intense conflict seen on the continent for half a century. Claims to apparently insignificant corners of the former Yugoslavia have become the justification for spectacular atrocities. We must expect the new nationalism to infect attitudes to land in our own country too. Will a Welsh assembly face demands for controls on the right of the English to buy property in the Principality? Will a Scottish parliament take an axe to the arrangements which allow absentee lairds to dictate the fate of vast expanses of the Highlands and Islands?

If these developments reflect past struggles, another increasingly urgent concern is quite new in the history of the planet. People are now demanding a stake in land thousands of miles away which they have no intention of living in, farming or even visiting. Land anywhere is now seen as of crucial importance to individuals everywhere, to the lives of their children, to the future of their species and also to that of other species with whom they have come to see themselves as sharing living space. Some date humanity's sense of the planet Earth as a shared and threatened home from those haunting pictures of that fragile blue globe suspended in blackness sent back to us by the first members of our species to experience life beyond its confines. Be that as it may, we have quickly been presented with more than enough cause to see our fate as inextricably entwined with the ground not just under our feet but stretching away beyond the horizon.

Such attitudes quickly translated into demands for action, with the spectacular protests of Greenpeace and other such organizations suggesting that humanity's biggest-ever cause required extraordinary efforts. This feeling seemed to have infected the political establishment when the biggest-ever gathering of world leaders took place at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 with the effective purpose of saving the world. The signing of a treaty on biodiversity at Rio implied a global commitment by the world's governments to take a hand in the world's habitats. This meant taking a new grip on the fate of land which was as ice-breaking as the more widely publicised treaty on global warming which committed governments to getting a grip on the air.

Within the UK land questions have imposed themselves on the national agenda in distinctly assertive forms. Perhaps the most dramatic innovation in political activity for many years has been the development of tree-and-tunnel direct action against road schemes to protect the environment. It was only as recently as 1992 that the first great clash took place. An armada of giant yellow earth-movers settled in to carve a ghastly white gash 100 feet deep and 400 yards wide through the cowslips and Iron Age village remnants of Twyford Down in Hampshire to fill in a missing link on the M3. This incursion provoked an ever-growing congregation of the outraged to converge on the site. Respectable middle-aged ladies and elderly gentlemen intermingled with neo-hippies, New Agers and ecowarriors in a campaign whose hopelessness lent it a sense of tragic dignity, rather than futility. Two years later hundreds of protestors against the proposed M11 link at Wanstead in east London were clashing with security guards and taking to the trees. By 1996 several hundred people were living in camps along the route of a by-pass being built round Newbury. More than 900 people were arrested and a mass rally attracted 8,000 people. Protestors against Manchester Airport's proposed new runway in 1997 created a system of tunnels of which the Viat Cong might have been proud, but their most famous progenitor, 'Swampy', was regarded as a national hero rather than a public nuisance.

Even more intimately bound up with the idea of land itself was the parallel protest movement of the squatters of George Monbiot's movement, 'The Land is Ours'. This organization appeared from nowhere to seize a patch of Surrey in 1995 in an operation consciously re-enacting the seizure of St George's Hill two miles away by the Diggers in 1649 'to assert the right of all men to land'. The move came in the wake of the growing phenomenon of 'new age travellers', drop-out nomads moving through the countryside in battered buses and camper vans in search of places where they could camp out. Numbering tens of thousands, but demonised by landowners and the police, they had inspired provisions in a new Criminal Justice Act designed to enable landowners to persecute them more effectively by criminalising certain forms of trespass. In Monbiot, the Oxford-educated son of a Conservative businessman, they found a champion who not only asserted their right to their way of life but offered a theoretical basis for it which implied a wider justification for the modern citizen's claim to a stake in the land. Monbiot told journalists who arrived in droves at the Surrey encampment that he and his followers were challenging the then government's presumption of the pre-eminence of property rights.

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He demanded that the use to which land was put must be justified in terms more convincing than that the owner's wishes were being fulfilled. People now as in the past, he suggested, had a right to expect land to be available to provide them with homes, space to grow their own food and to live their lives as they wished. After the Surrey event, further occupations were staged in Nottingham, Birmingham, Manchester and Oxford. Then, in 1996, The Land is Ours seized a 13-acre piece of prime riverside real estate owned by Guinness just up river from the Houses of Parliament in Wandsworth. Guinness had wanted to turn the land over to retail use, while local people had wanted it used in ways more beneficial to them. Instead it suddenly became home to the geodesic dome and Mongolian yurts of a remarkable 'eco-village' which became one of London's sights, visited by the curious from all over the world. Other organizations captured the imagination of other assertive and uncompromising activists. Earth First, a group which had grown up in the United States and concentrated on preserving wilderness and biodiversity, took matters further. Protesters deliberately disabled machinery so that development could not proceed.

Yet it is not only the self-excluded, tattooed, body-pierced and sometimes be-feathered young who are challenging the land ownership regime of the Britain of the 1990s. Ramblers, hitherto regarded as meek and respectable, have mounted a challenge of their own to the right of Britain's landowners to exclude them from their holdings. In 1985 the Ramblers' Association launched what was to become an annual event called 'Forbidden Britain' Day at Snailsden Moor in the Peak District. By 1991 Forbidden Britain Day was seeing the biggest mass trespasses since the 1930s, with 500 ramblers striding 41/2 miles over South Yorkshire's Thurlstone Moor, while 40 other locations saw lesser such demonstrations. Once these events had made their point, the ramblers moved from defying the law to changing it. They lobbied the opposition Labour Party to commit itself to creating a right of access at least to hill country, and succeeded in this aim. The Labour government elected in 1997 committed itself to creating a right of access to all moor, mountain and common land.

Meanwhile, those who appear to control the countryside are experiencing a sharp collapse in the popularity they enjoyed in the past. A more questioning public wants to know why farmers should be given subsidies to pollute the earth and destroy its landscape and wildlife while preventing their tax-paying sponsors from even walking on their land. Concern about the treatment of animals in the countryside has fused with such concerns. The BSE fiasco destroyed the idea that farmers could be left to decide what was best for the animals in their care. Some people also took the view that farmers who could not be trusted to feed their animals safely could not be trusted to look after them in other ways. In 1995, the transport of animals for export began to provoke yet another set of demonstrations. Daily protests in Dover, Brightlingsea, Shoreham and other places whence calves and lambs were shipped to Europe saw respectable middle-class ladies wrestling with policemen as they tried to block the path of lorries carrying veal-calves. Hunting, long disliked by a large majority, became an urgent political issue. The National Trust was forced by its two and a half million members to ban stag-hunting on its land.

The Labour party promised a free vote on the banning of all hunting with hounds, and once in power immediately found itself confronted by a private member's bill designed to require it to implement this pledge.

All these signs of changes in thinking about land questions both at home and abroad reflect deeper shifts in the prevailing attitudes. Awareness that the habitat of our species is something in which all members of that species have not only an interest but also a stake has moved from being a fringe concern to a central part of our mainstream polity. Everyone now takes it for granted that the land is too important to be left to landowners. Along with the sea, the air and the heavens, it is space to which all of us must stake a claim, because what happens there, whether it be the destruction of rain forests in Brazil or hedgerows in Britain, can affect all our lives.

Coinciding with this aspiration to control our surroundings comes a new belief that we have the right to do so. The western idea of land as property to be exploited by its individual owners for their personal profit still seemed unassailable in what was known as the Free World in the 1980s. The 1990s have however seen a resurgence of communal values, involving the assertion of the interests of those who do not happen to own wealth and power against those who do. Thus, more and more people believe that human beings who have not been fortunate enough to own large chunks of land should have a say in what happens to it. Politicians desperate to rebuild a sense of community encourage the belief that rights of the people should be extended to embrace their legitimate concerns. A new civic order based on a proper balance of rights and duties would surely give the people a right to a say in the fate of the land and landowners the responsibility to take account of the public interest.

In Britain these developments have helped give rise to profound concern about the fate of the countryside. The role of the urban environment as a theatre for human life and work is not in question. But the role of the countryside, which encompasses 80 per cent of Britain's land, is up for very real debate. At present, 80 per cent of the countryside is given over to food production, subsidised by the citizenry but controlled by individual farmers. A revolt against subsidy is bringing into question the dominant position of agriculture not only in Britain but in the other European Union countries. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of demand from new would-be users of the countryside for recreation opportunities and wildlife reserves, not to speak of new roads and homes. The government's plan to allow the building of 4.4 million new dwellings in England alone by the year 2016 has made concrete a hitherto abstract debate about what the rural landscape is for.

There are many different ways in which we could reshape our countryside to bring it more into line with the wishes of the people. We could ask farmers either to release land, or, alternatively, to farm more extensively so that they could grow food without causing so much destruction and pollution. We could insist that meadows are retained for wild flowers and that foresters grow broad-leaved native trees, that archaeological monuments are protected from the plough and that hedgerows, ponds, copses and heaths should not only be protected but reinstated.

We could turn over swathes of our greenscape to developers anxious to profit by providing homes with gardens or we could try to prevent the suburbanization this would bring by concentrating new householders on urban sites. We could demand access to our countryside and decent treatment for the creatures that live in it both wild and domesticated. Or we could dedicate it to the pursuits of the privileged and powerful who can afford to buy priority within it.

Bit by bit, more and more demands of one kind or another are coming from the majority who have hitherto been excluded from the countryside both physically and politically. These demands are however coming up against a reality that is particular to Britain, and not encountered in quite the same form by those who are seeking to reclaim the land around them in southern Africa, eastern Europe or the Americas. The countryside of Britain is controlled by a small, tightly-knit group of individuals dedicated to retaining their power over what they believe that they own absolutely and ought to continue to own absolutely, not only for their own good but for ours as well. This landowning class may be less blatant than its counterparts in Latin America or south Asia, but its belief in its own right to rule its own holdings is no less strong. As a result, the challenges which are being mounted by Britain's urban population to the rural elite have already elicited an organised response.

The 100,000-strong rally in Hyde Park on 10 July 1997 organised by the 'Countryside Alliance' to protest against threats to the country 'way of life', such as the abolition of fox-hunting, took the media by surprise. Yet it reflected years of careful mobilization by the landowning classes to what they perceive as a growing onslaught on their interests from the mainly urban-based majority of the population. What was new about the rally was a bold attempt by those who have been most privileged for centuries to cast themselves as victims and take over what up till now have been the methods of their antagonists. Dark hints even emerged that if the urban masses pushed too hard, farmers might block roads like their French counterparts and that uncontrollable extremists might adopt tactics like those of America's militias or even interfere with water supplies to cities. Such developments reflect the seriousness with which landowners now regard the threats confronting them.

Public relations expertise has underpinned landowners' strength since long before the craft secured its current sway. In the past they played upon stereotypical misconceptions about the rural scene to persuade the public that the countryside was safe in the hands of farmers who saw themselves as custodians of landscape and wildlife. They presented landowners as gentle and dignified people struggling to maintain their ancient homes for the good of the nation in the face of impoverishment by death duties. As these images faded in the 1980s, they cast around for new forms of defence. In 1995 a new pressure group emerged to spearhead the landowners' fight-back against the new challenges to their hegemony. Chaired by Sir David Steel, the Countryside Movement presented itself as the voice of the rural community, but though backed by the Country Landowners' Association and the National Farmers' Union it was opposed by the Ramblers' Association. It worked to present the interests of the rural establishment as those of the countryside as a whole.

The hope was that the emerging struggle between landowners and people could be seen instead as a battle between the country and the town. The angels would be on the side of pastoral innocence rather than the brutish insensitivity and ignorance of the dark, satanic wen.

Though the Countryside Movement itself soon faded from view, the thinking behind it triumphed at the Hyde Park rally. This elicited exactly the desired sympathy from the media and appeared to help frighten the government off providing parliamentary time for the Bill to ban fox-hunting to be introduced by backbencher Michael Foster. Yet landowners are as aware as anyone that this is only the first skirmish in a war which seems set to move close to the centre-stage in British life. The struggle over economic redistribution which has dominated British politics for a generation has been fought to a standstill. Yet it may well be that it will be replaced at least in part by a new struggle between the few who control land and the many who are coming to demand a say in what happens on it. If all this baffles the media, it should not surprise anyone with a sense of history. For most of the last thousand years, the central political struggle in Britain has been between landowners and the landless. After the Millennium, the twentieth century's preoccupation with urban economic questions may come to seem a temporary and peculiar aberration. It is the endless contention over the land on which we all must live which is the most natural source of conflict in human life.

To understand the emerging land war in Britain we need to grasp a set of realities quite foreign to those of us who have been brought up on the preoccupations of post-war urban Britain. We need to understand landowners, who are quite different from the urban capitalists. We also need to understand the motives and arguments of those without land who are nonetheless making a claim to a stake in it. And we need to work out how justice can be brought to bear on the conflict. It was to address these questions that I wrote *This Land is Our Land* in 1987, and it is to address them now that I offer this new edition.

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