

This Land Is Our Land

by Marion Shoard

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Preface to 1987 Edition

The most fundamental resource of human beings everywhere has always been the land itself. Land is the source not only of the food we eat and the minerals from which we build shelters and shape implements, but of the space we occupy as well. When it has provided for our needs, it accommodates our pleasures. Because it is a finite resource it has always been the subject of struggle between tribes and races, nations and classes, who wish to put it to conflicting uses. Yet in otherwise strife-torn industrial Britain the land itself has been the potential theatre of conflict on which the curtain has so far failed to rise. For the last 200 years, political struggle here has largely revolved round the jobs and incomes and taxes and welfare of a population apparently firmly rooted in the towns and cities of one of the world's most industrialized countries. Eighty per cent of the land surface of Britain is countryside, but rural affairs have been more or less left to the tiny group which happens to own land. Now, however, it looks as though the land question may reassert itself as in so many other countries today, and in our own past, the fate of the land henceforth seems likely to arouse here the most intense of political passions.

Over the past quarter of a century, city-dwellers have been taking a deeper and deeper interest in their natural environment. This trend has complex origins and exhibits itself in diverse forms. But its effect has been to take more and more people out into the countryside either to set up home or to pursue a variety of leisure interests. Interest in what goes on there has risen sharply, and as a result a real challenge to the existing rural order has emerged.

City-dwellers used to blame themselves for abusing the rural environment through pollution and excessive consumption of the earth's finite resources. Landowners were victims, like the countryside itself, of urban greed. Since 1970, however, this guilt has given way to a new assertiveness. The countryside has come to be seen more and more as playing a vital role in all our lives. As people have come to be aware of what they want from the countryside so they have also become aware that they are often thwarted by the landowners who run it. The loudest complaints have concerned the transformation of the landscape by agricultural change and conifer afforestation, both of which threaten to make the countryside less attractive and less accessible to the ordinary urban visitor.

The discovery that the citizen has little chance of influencing such changes has helped foster a new mood of hostility towards the landowning classes, extending interest in issues of minority concern like factory farming, straw burning and fox hunting.

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As such issues multiply and arrive on the mainstream political agenda, it is becoming apparent that two quite different value systems are on course for collision. The tastes and standards, objectives and methods of those who run the countryside are very different from those of the urban population. The landowners see the rural environment as theirs to exploit and enjoy by themselves; the ramblers and weekenders see the countryside and the living things which inhabit it as objects of their own affection and a source of pleasure for themselves. Each side believes the countryside is its birthright, but it does not appear to be big enough for them both. At present the rural landowners are beyond the reach of much of the democratic machinery which has subjected their urban counterparts to the will of their fellow citizens. Now they are likely to face a determined onslaught aimed at the imposition of similar constraints, but they will not accept these without a fight.

The impending clash could develop into the climax of a struggle for the land of Britain that has remained unresolved for over a thousand years. This book describes the battle-lines and attempts to identify the scope for a resolution of the conflict which would preserve as much as possible of the honour, dignity and interests of the combatants.

Part One outlines the global context of Britain's system of land organization, and sets out the historical backcloth against which present-day relations between landowners and landless in Britain are played out. Part Two describes the present owners of rural land in the United Kingdom, and Part Three analyses the ways in which they exploit their holdings and the impact of their activities on the rest of society. Part Four examines the effectiveness of the present legal framework in protecting the ordinary citizen's interests in the countryside. Part Five lays out the areas of conflict between landowners and the rest of society today, while Part Six discusses ideas currently in play for reconciling these conflicts and notes their limitations. Part Seven puts forward new approaches to the problem. Part Eight provides an assessment of the likelihood of successful reform.