

Book review

Whose Land is our Land? The Use and Abuse of Britain's Forgotten Acres

Peter Hetherington

Bristol: Policy Press (Shorts Insights), 2015, 110 pages, £7.99 (Pb)

ISBN: 978 14 4732 532 1

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Since the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market and the subsequent threat to the integrity of the global financial system and the imposition of austerity, the gap between those who have and those who have not is growing ever wider. The flow of finance and capital investments continues to search for opportunities and create markets that sustain investors' profits. Whilst this is not necessarily new, we live in times in which ownership of assets can be obscured by offshore registration, tax havens and shell companies. With the retreat of the state in an era of neo-liberalism this can have an influence and impact on social and public policy to create uncertainty and insecurity. It can also limit opportunities for access to and use of one of the most important resources of any nation, its land. Peter Hetherington, a regular contributor to the Guardian newspaper on communities and regeneration, makes a timely intervention to the debate in his book *'Whose Land is our Land? The Use and Abuse of Britain's Forgotten Acres'*. It puts at the centre concerns about who owns Britain and details the consequences this can have for individuals, for communities and for society at large.

Whilst being rather short (110 pages including index) the book nonetheless provides a cogent discussion and commentary based partly on archival and statistical research, and partly on interviews conducted with land owners, campaigners and activists for land reform, parliamentarians and from those directly affected by the speculation and control over so much of Britain's acreage. It is divided into nine chapters that are written in an authoritative but accessible style that one would expect from an experienced and established investigative journalist. At the same time it provides a range of links, references and quotes from the sources and individuals he introduces. In the initial chapters Hetherington lays out his argument concerning the importance of knowledge of land ownership and provides a historical and political contextualisation of the processes by which the feudal system of rights to access and use common lands was replaced through enclosure as the capitalist system of private ownership was established. For example, in Chapter 1 (*Land for All?*), Hetherington reminds us that the 'Green and Pleasant Land' that is mythologised and romanticised in art, literature, poetry and music may still provoke a strong emotional connection, but it is far from freely accessible, owned by the majority of the population or subject to the collective needs of society. He argues that, despite the surge in home ownership after the Thatcher government started selling off the nation's social housing, the proportion

of land owned by the majority remains small. He sets out the main question of the book: do we use land for the benefit of all citizens or for a privileged few?

In the second chapter (*The People's Land?*) the impact of the Enclosure Acts and the Highland Clearances on land ownership and tenure is discussed. Whilst the rise of collective endeavours (whether directly state owned and run like the Forestry Commission) or charitable bodies such as the National Trust have made huge impacts on access to and use of land, at the beginning of the 21st century private landowners such as the Dukes of Westminster, Buccleuch and Northumberland as well as the Crown Estates remain in charge of large swathes of real estate in towns and cities as well as the countryside. They have enormous influence and control over how that land is used, for what purposes and by whom. This theme is continued in chapter three (*Land Denied*), in which he takes to task large landholders such as the National Trust for not engaging and involving tenants in decisions and strategic developments, as well as the lack of coherent government strategies that address insecurities in tenure as well as in sustainable and secure food production policies. Similarly in Chapter Four (*Land Secure?*), he uses the example of the power and influence of the Duke of Northumberland to demonstrate how old aristocratic families (the Percy's have held large areas of land since at least the 14th century) have evolved to their current business model that is as much about consolidation of family business holdings and the pursuit of profit as it is about the best interests of the land or those who depend upon it. The same, he argues, is the case for one of the largest landowners in Scotland, the Duke of Buccleuch.

The middle two chapters of the book (*Unclear Ownership* and *Land for the People*) deal with what might be considered the nub of the problem that the book focusses on, namely the lack of a coherent and systematic land registry in England and Wales that enforces disclosure and ensures that ownership is clear and transparent. He argues that various governments have procrastinated and taken a laissez faire approach to the ownership of land. A comprehensive record has not been in place or a priority for many governments. The following chapter links the lack of transparency of ownership with generous tax breaks and profits to be made from speculation as contributing to the scandalous lack of investment in the building of not only social but also affordable housing.

However, Hetherington argues that all is not lost. In Chapter 7 (*Villages and Neighbourhoods Rising*) he gives examples of progress in land reform and investment that benefits individuals but also, perhaps more importantly, communities. He discusses a number of Community Land Trusts (CLTs) in England where, on a relatively small scale, ownership and investment in land has led to the building of social housing, houses for sale whose profits can be reinvested in further building, as well as in establishing social enterprises (workshops, schools, allotments, etc.). This model, he argues, can be expanded, but this requires government intervention and support and a coherent planning and support system for community developments. In Chapter 8 (*Highlands and Islands Rising*) he discusses in detail the successes of the devolved Scottish Government in legislating to ensure that communities have the first option in buying the land they live on when it comes up for sale; the setting up of a Scottish Land Fund to assist communities in buying this land; the amendment of the rights of succession so landowners cannot leave estates to a single heir; the establishment of a permanent Land Reform Commission; and the reintroduction of business rates on sporting estates. He argues that this is a model of progress that could be followed elsewhere in the UK.

In the final chapter (*Will England Rise?*) he argues that now more than ever there is a need to address the glaring inadequacies in land ownership through first of all a more effective and comprehensive Land Register, as well a coherent system of taxation and

planning that prioritises the social and economic needs of the whole rather than the speculative profits of a few very wealthy individuals and companies. Otherwise the continuing failure to meet the housing needs of this and future generations as well as achieving food security and sustainable development will continue to be unrealised.

This is a book that will interest a range of scholars in a number of disciplines as well as the lay reader who is concerned about how and why land ownership remains opaque and yet influences and impacts on housing developments, flood defences, food production and a sustainable economic and social policy agenda. Land is an emotive issue and one that is used in a number of ways to link history, identity and politics. For example, Kevin McKenna has argued in the *Guardian* (2017) that the problem is not a shortage of land but the way in which it is used for personal gain at the expense of the many. We need to address how this fundamentally important resource can be used more effectively for all and not merely a few. To fail to do so will not only continue to foster inequalities but also impact on our food and environmental security in the future.

Whilst I would thoroughly recommend this book I would add a slight caveat. It purports to be concerned with Britain's hidden acres and whilst it covers England well and raises the differences in history and policy with Scotland post devolution, it fails to address the history of experience of Wales or Northern Ireland. Both have their own contexts, but nonetheless land ownership in both historical and contemporary periods have influenced sectarian divides, as well as in Wales spawned an avowedly anti-settler nationalist movement, *Meibion Glyndwr*, more commonly known as the Sons of Glyndwr. Both countries now have devolved administrations and it would have been useful and more balanced to have some discussion and analysis of how land ownership issues in these two nations are being addressed.

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