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REVIEW: WHO OWNS BRITAIN?

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Kevin Cahill, **Who Owns Britain: The Hidden Facts behind Landownership in the UK and Ireland**, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002, 450pp, pb, £16.99, ISBN 1-84195-310-5.

In the first part of 2003, the Scottish Parliament debated an Agricultural Holdings Bill. The Bill, as drafted, gave agricultural tenants a pre-emptive right of purchase should the estate on which they are resident be put on the market. This, a substantial advance on the previous position, was voted through. But when the parliamentary supporters of a tenant farming lobby group tried to have the Bill amended in such a way as to give tenants an absolute right to buy their farms at any time, something which would have made an even bigger contribution to unleashing enterprise and initiative in the countryside, the amendment was voted down – the charge against it, like opposition to the parliament's land reform agenda more generally, being led by Conservative MSPs. Quite what today's Tories think they gain from their anti-land reform stance, I am not sure. Tactically, this stance helps guarantee their continued failure in parts of the country, such as the Highlands and Islands where, not all that long ago, they were electorally dominant. Ideologically, Tory hostility to land reform disconnects the modern Conservative Party from its own history – Conservatives, though they nowadays seem unaware of the fact, having a better record as land reformers than any other political grouping in the British Isles.

Something of this is evident in the Highlands and Islands where legislation initiated by Conservative or Conservative-dominated administrations was responsible, during the first 30 or so years of the twentieth century, for the creation of several thousand new crofts – many of these crofts taking shape on land purchased by a state agency, the Board of Agriculture for Scotland,

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from the lairds who had previously owned it. But land settlement of the Highlands and Islands type was no more than a pale reflection of the policy on which it was modelled: a policy which Tory politicians began introducing in Ireland (then ruled in its entirety by Westminster) in the years around 1900; a policy which, when it took full effect, resulted in the tiny handful of mostly absentee landlords who had previously controlled the bulk of the Irish countryside being replaced by more than 400,000 owner-occupying farmers. Although the land reform legislation which brought about this social revolution did not kill off Irish nationalism, as its Conservative promoters hoped would happen, it did have the effect, as these same Conservatives intended, of turning a demoralised, and often half-starved, peasant class into a set of increasingly prosperous, increasingly dynamic, entrepreneurs. It is in this sense, Kevin Cahill contends in his important and illuminating book, that Tory land reforms paved the way for the modern transformation of the Irish Republic into one of the more successful capitalist economies in Europe.

At times, I suspect, Cahill takes his arguments further than the evidence permits. Even if United Kingdom politicians had been prepared to do in Britain what they did in Ireland, would the country's relative decline have really been slowed dramatically or even avoided completely, as Cahill suggests? I doubt it. What I do not doubt, however, is the urgent need for Westminster to follow the Scottish Parliament's lead by taking seriously the case for land reform. That case is set out persuasively in Kevin Cahill's pages. These pages are an exercise – an extremely valuable exercise – in establishing some of the basic facts about the United Kingdom's landownership structure. They are also a sustained plea for social justice – for a more equitable distribution both of land and of the wealth which it generates. But over and over again this plea is underpinned by Cahill's conviction – evident in his treatment of the Irish reforms already touched on – that the present concentration of landownership in a few privileged, and still largely aristocratic, hands is having a seriously crippling effect on the workings of our market economy. Kevin Cahill's book, then, does not – like a lot of other calls for land reform – emanate from the political left. The case it makes for change is overwhelmingly a business-friendly case – and that, given current political circumstances, helps make his book significant. It is made more significant still by the links which it makes between land reform and the equally contentious issue of agricultural support.

Like his Scottish precursors, the late John McEwen and Andy Wightman, whose approach he extends from Scotland to the United Kingdom as a whole,

Kevin Cahill began writing about landownership as a result of having become infuriated by the secrecy which surrounds it. In the manner of investigative journalists – and his book is none the worse for being journalistic rather than academic in tone – he is prone to see this secrecy as the product of a conspiracy. Maybe there is such a conspiracy; maybe there is not. Either way, it is wrong that our democracy has for so long been denied meaningful answers to the question posed in Cahill's title, Who Owns Britain? It is equally wrong, Kevin Cahill asserts and I agree, that the state refuses to tell us who gets the billions of pounds-worth of farm subsidies dished out annually in our name. Some of the beneficiaries of these subsidies get more than a £1 million from British and European Union taxpayers every twelve months. But we do not know who they are. This, when you stop to think about it, is extraordinary – even more extraordinary, in its way, than the fact that successive United Kingdom governments have done absolutely nothing to alter the outmoded, restrictive and inequitable pattern of landownership which Kevin Cahill's book reveals.

In Scotland, over the last ten years or so, estates which were previously owned privately have gone into community ownership at an accelerating rate. Many community purchases – of Knoydart, say, or Gigha – have been part-financed with cash from public or lottery sources. The sums of money involved have so far amounted, on an annual basis, to a fraction of one per cent of spending on agricultural support. That has not stopped the representatives of landowning interests – interests which are pocketing hundreds of millions of pounds of subsidy every year in Scotland – from attacking community land ownership as a waste of money. In fact, it represents a much better investment than pouring huge sums into hopelessly unviable land uses such as those associated with large-scale sheep farming. Community land ownership offers rural residents of every kind the chance to take charge of their own lives and to develop successful rural economies of the sort made possible by new telecommunications and other technologies. But because community ownership – despite the welcome boost it will get from the Scottish Executive's Land Reform Act – is likely to remain comparatively limited in extent, we need to find other ways of getting the countryside out of the clutches of people who have exercised unrestricted control over it for far too long.

To glimpse the sort of countryside we could have in the future, it is necessary only to visit somewhere like Skye – its population up by nearly 50 per cent in 30 years, its economy expanding, its townships awash with new homes. While

there are a whole series of reasons as to why such regeneration is occurring in Skye and several other parts of the Highlands and Islands, a basic part of the explanation is to be found in crofting – which makes for a much more flexible approach to land use than is to be found in areas, such as Perthshire or the Borders, where big estates are given over largely to plantation forestry, to upland farming or to sport and where, as a result, it is practically impossible for people to move in and for a more diverse economy to develop. The interests obstructing such development are also, of course, the interests who complain constantly about a 'crisis in the countryside'. The only such crisis is the one affecting their own farming and associated businesses – businesses which, for all their unprofitable nature, we continue to prop up with subsidy of the sort removed long ago from coalmining, shipbuilding and the like. As experience in Skye and elsewhere demonstrates, an economically viable, socially flourishing and repopulating countryside is perfectly within our grasp. All we need are reforms designed to bring this kind of countryside into existence. If it helps make these reforms happen more quickly, Kevin Cahill's book will have done a good job.

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