

REVIEWS

Land and nation in England

Paul Readman, *Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880–1914* (Royal Historical Society, Studies in History New Series, 2008)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

THE NOTION of ‘the land for the people’ has become an almost mythical tradition of British liberalism, perhaps because land reform was such an important issue during the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods – the final years when the Liberal Party retained its position as one of the two great parties of state. Lloyd George’s land campaign, launched in 1913, is one of the great might-have-beens of Liberal politics, offering the possibility that, but for the intervention of the First World War, it might have reinvigorated the party and prolonged its electoral success. Of course, it was not to be, with the Liberal Party and the land question alike fading from the political spotlight after the First World War. Dr Readman’s study of the land question in England during the twenty-five years before 1914 will therefore be of particular interest to students of Liberal history, even though its scope extends well beyond the realm of any one political party.

There were a number of reasons why land reform was considered of such importance during this period. In the late nineteenth century there was widespread concern about the perceived decline of British agriculture and the twin problems of urban squalor and rural depopulation. English systems of land tenure, including primogeniture and entail, designed to keep estates together, made the free sale of land impossible, reducing the dynamism of the rural economy. Ideas about spreading land ownership and tenure were discussed as a key to both economic and social progress, for rural communities and the country as a whole, by halting national decline.

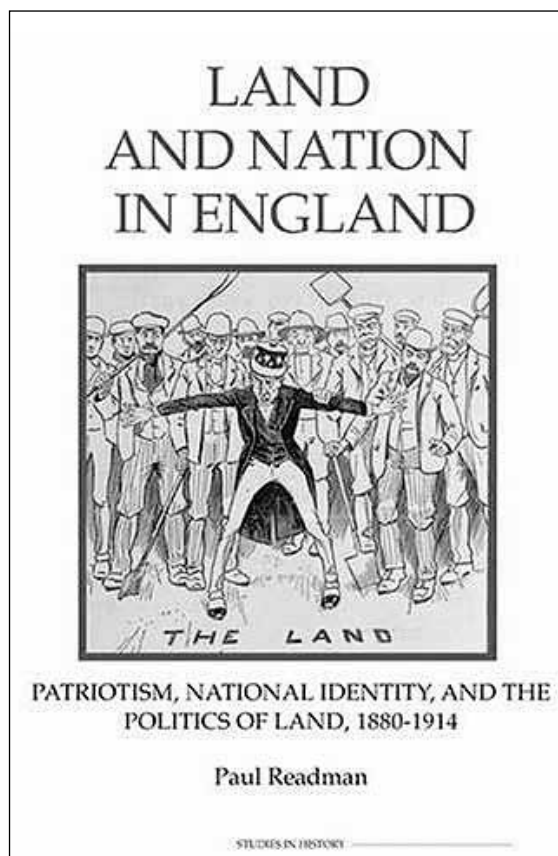
Dr Readman examines how Liberals, Conservatives and socialists each engaged with these issues. He does this with an emphasis on political language, and in particular on the ways in which politicians approached the issue in terms of patriotism, national character and the relationship between land and ‘Englishness’. The author finds it ‘astonishing’ that previous scholars have not made the link between land and national identity and aims to fill the gap. I don’t quite share the author’s surprise, since, although recent years have seen a greater interest among historians in the theme of patriotism (whether British, English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh), it has generally been considered in the context of social, cultural or intellectual, rather than political, history. However, I certainly agree that, in linking the practical question of land reform with the more abstract question of patriotism, Dr Readman is undertaking a welcome new departure, which will hopefully lead to fruitful areas of further research.

Many historians have argued, and it is easy therefore to assume, that during the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, patriotic language was largely the preserve of the political right, from Disraeli giving Queen Victoria the title of Empress of India through to the riotous celebrations of the relief of Mafeking during the Boer War. The author demonstrates clearly that this was not the case – while Conservatives and Liberal Unionists did attempt to exploit a patriotic agenda for electoral gain, both Liberals and socialists developed their own patriotic narrative of land reform and challenged the notion that

government interference in the land question marked an unwarranted invasion of established property rights.

For Liberals, this involved arguing that land was different from other kinds of property because it was God-given rather than man-made. They saw the enclosures of the eighteenth century as an act of dispossession of the people that could be put right now that democracy had replaced aristocracy as the basis for government. They wanted to give local authorities compulsory purchase powers to create allotments and smallholdings so that rural dwellers once again had a stake in the land. Legislation in the early years of the 1905–15 Liberal government had only limited success and was ultimately followed by the launch of Lloyd George’s land campaign in 1913, which sought not only to transform land tenure, but also to improve rural wages and housing conditions as part of a comprehensive programme for the reform of rural England.

It may too easily be assumed that this was a sign of the Liberals’ embrace of a more collectivist political approach associated with the so-called New Liberalism. Dr



Readman questions this, pointing out that much Liberal rhetoric was about putting the land on a business footing and also about land reform as a democratic measure – a continuation of the Liberal commitment to creating class harmony. While state intervention in land ownership and tenure was clearly not compatible with hard-line laissez-faire economics, such views had always had rather less purchase on the Liberal Party than is often thought. Liberal commitment to land reform therefore represented continuity rather than a new departure. Of course, Conservative opponents tried to present Liberal land legislation as socialist in intent and effect. However, partly as a shield against such accusations, the Liberals were careful to situate their reforms within a tradition of Englishness, looking backwards both to the pre-enclosure times and to some extent to the ‘popular system of self-government’ that applied in villages in Anglo-Saxon England.

Liberal attitudes to land reform contrasted with those of both Conservatives/Unionists and socialists, in terms not only of practical solutions, but also of the historical precedents they cited. Many traditional Conservatives were sceptical of any attempt to widen access to land, regarding such things as an attack on property rights and an unviable way of organising agriculture. However, the widening of the franchise following the 1884–85 reform acts and the accession to the Conservative ranks of the Liberal Unionists meant that a simple defence of the status quo was no longer a realistic option. Instead, Unionists, driven in part by Jesse Collings, an acolyte of Joseph Chamberlain, sought to widen land ownership through the revival of the yeoman class of peasant proprietors that had existed before the enclosures. This approach had briefly held attractions for Liberals too, but the latter had concluded that it would merely widen social divisions by strengthening the ranks of landed proprietorship, rather than giving all classes access to the land. Socialist writers such as Robert Blatchford and H. M. Hyndman likewise had their distinctive perspective. They stressed medieval traditions of ‘Merrie England’,

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of land being held in common by the people, and regarded the Reformation and dissolution of the monasteries as the moment when the land was stolen from the people. In contrast with Liberals and Conservatives, their preferred solution was land nationalisation rather than widening access to the land for individuals.

While each party offered different solutions to the land questions, the common thread was that all sought to present historical precedents that provided a patriotic dimension to their plans. The importance of patriotism as a factor in British politics is often overlooked, perhaps because it is so much easier to focus on concrete ‘issues’ rather than abstract ‘themes’. Dr Readman therefore breaks new ground in discussing the land issue within the context of Englishness and national identity.

Inevitably, though, in breaking new ground, the book suggests questions as well as answering them. The most important of these concerns the intention behind the politicians’ use of patriotic rhetoric. It is no surprise that patriotism was a feature of debates over land reform – for politicians seeking to win votes it is probably a good idea to articulate an uplifting view of the land and people they seek to govern.

But patriotic rhetoric can be used in different ways: for example, as an offensive or defensive weapon or to reassure or inflame popular opinion. During this period, the Unionists clearly used empire and national defence to question others’ patriotic credentials as well as to establish their own, and Liberals struggled to counter this. One wonders whether Liberal and socialist patriotic language over the land question was motivated by a genuine wish to contrast their own patriotic vision with that of their Unionist opponents. Alternatively, it may simply have been a means of shielding themselves against accusations of introducing alien revolutionary ideas into British politics. Was patriotism a motivating factor in views of the different parties or merely a rhetorical device? One hopes that the publication of Dr Readman’s excellent book will trigger further debate among historians on these and other issues concerning the role of patriotism within political discourse.

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A tale of two symbols

Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

AMONG LIBERAL Democrat activists traditions are in conflict. The legatees of the classical liberalism of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, gathered round the contributors to the *The Orange Book*, dispute with the inheritors of New Liberalism, who published *Reinventing the State*. Battle has been joined in fringe meetings at the party’s federal conferences but also surfaces in conference resolutions,

most notably in September 2006 when the neo-New Liberals were prominent in the debate on whether the party should retain a 50 per cent income tax rate, not for its revenue potential but as a totem of the party’s concern for the less well-off. The clash is evident whenever the party’s Shadow Chancellor, Vince Cable, suggests that freer trade might be in the interest of less developed countries.