



Time to cut our feudal ties

Who Owns Britain?

Kevin Cahill

Canongate

£25 hardback

By Alan Laurie

Kevin Cahill tells us that Tony Blair "cut the umbilical cord of history" when he ejected 66 peers from the House of Lords. Cahill's big and meticulously researched book shows how aristocratic landowners have dominated Britain for centuries and that their control has become the dead hand of the economy and society.

The word "conspiracy" is used twice in the preface, which begins by examining why all efforts to collect and publish a register of all the holdings of land in the UK have been frustrated up to now.

Today the buying and selling of small properties is duly recorded. How is it that the holdings of the big aristocratic landowners have avoided public scrutiny? Why is there one system for the ordinary citizen and another for the great?

The book lists the major registered holders of land and compares the 1872 and 2001 Registers' lists of top landowners. Cahill reveals the big players and how they operate.

In Ireland, the redistribution of land at the end of the last century entailed the buying out of the big landlords – a revolution which, in

the author's opinion, has much to do with the successful economy of Ireland today. How is it, asks Cahill, that there is no council tax there, and better old-age pensions?

In England, one of the strongest criticisms he makes is on the question of land prices. The cost of development land continues to rise. Half a million people lost their homes between 1990 and 1997 and tenant farmers are now giving up because they cannot pay the rent. On the other hand, there is no tax on farmland and some 157,000 landowners receive £21 billion in subsidy.

Cahill sees it as vital for the future of England to find peaceful ways to break the link between wealth and power: power that has historically been used ruthlessly to increase wealth against a background of a largely landless and powerless population.

The book reaches farther than questions on how to recover community value. Cahill wants land to become part of our democracy and not the possession of a small group of people whose influence is harmful to the great majority. But how can we achieve this when our constitution favours those who hold the economic power? (See box) The author provides us with the means to analyse the economic consequences of the over-mighty landed aristocracy.

As we look at the way our European neighbours seem to handle their land, housing, health service, taxation and transport system, maybe the penny will drop. We missed out on modernising our land tenure. It is high time we got on with it.

For more reviews see Books, page 18.

At the current £3,000 value of an agricultural acre, there are 41,000 millionaire families who between them receive the £4 billion annual subsidy. But, unlike domestic homeowners who pay Council Tax, the landowners pay no tax on their non-domestic acreage.

The scandal is they get paid from the public purse to retain their valuable assets and don't even have to register their ownership.

Wills tried to tell Sanders that all land would be registered by 2010, adding that the Law Reform Commission had spent six years producing the current Bill, which will not actually move registration forward. **L&L**

The value of land, homes and shares

UK land

Total value of non-domestic / development land	£296,000,000,000
Non-domestic land	40,000,000 acres
Development land	400,000 acres
Non-domestic land value	£120,000,000,000
Development land value	£176,000,000,000
Number of owners / families	157,000
Average value of holding	£1,800,000

All the above figures are gross and ignore debt and mortgages

UK housing

Market capitalisation	£1,394,000,000,000
Number of private homes	16,500,000
Average home value	£84,500
Number of individual stakeholders	362,000,000
Average number of stakeholders per unit	2.2
Average value of each stakeholder's share	£38,400

UK Stock Exchange

Market capitalisation at 31/12/00	£1,796,000,000,000
Number of individual shareholders	12,500,000
Average value of individual shareholders	£10,000

Source: London Stock Exchange and Pro-Share 2000



Hundreds of people have lost their homes because of an increase in the cost of land for development

Photography: Lucy Glover