

BOOK REVIEWS

OVER-POPULATION: A PROCRUSTEAN SOLUTION

The Third Revolution

Paul Harrison, Penguin, £6.99

AFTER his revealing survey of Third World poverty and its shameful origins, which made an earlier work into a classic best-seller,* Paul Harrison's new book is a disappointment. Here, he attempts to forecast the economic future of Planet Earth and the social consequences for its inhabitants.

The population of the world, he notes, is over 5 billion and increasing. UN projections are some 11 billion by the year 2100. The world would then face major resource crises. Reserves of aluminium, copper, zinc, oil and coal will be used up and many countries pushing against limits of land, water and food. Threats from deforestation, soil erosion, climatic dessication and global warming which will then face us, will make today's worldwide environmental problems seem like little local difficulties. Countering these dangers, he asserts, needs a revolution - in population, consumption and technology, but plainly the main focus of his attention is on population.

In *Inside the Third World*, he noted a number of factors which exploded the myth that the basic malady of those stricken areas was simply a matter of over-population. The hunger that stalks the Third World, he asserted, was the result of poverty and the lack of "effective demand" among the Third World's underdogs. And poverty, he noted, could occur in the midst of plenty as, for example, where huge areas of the most productive land have been grabbed by powerful local elites, and where "labour surpluses" are deliberately created by vast stretches of land being kept under weeds and shrubs, all this leading to "grinding poverty among those without adequate access to land".

Mr. Harrison has not forgotten these oppressive, man-made barriers

to proper use of the Earth's resources. But here they are accepted as part of the social scenery; immutable conditions to which, in the style of Procrustes, population must be cut to fit.

The expropriation of land, he admits, "has driven large numbers of people into marginal or smaller areas." But there is no talk now of the need for land reform. Instead, the blame for the resulting abysmal living conditions seems to fall on the victims themselves, on the grounds that their crowding into left-overs of wasteland "artificially boosts population density".

Mr. Harrison's view now, apparently, is that population is the variable factor which must adjust itself - or be forcibly adjusted - according to the degree of tyranny endured by the people. If land-grabbing by local barons forces the people into marginal or unwholesome areas, their numbers must be restricted so as to avoid "over-population".

Mr. Harrison claims to be objective, to give weight to the apocalyptic forecasts of Malthusians, the reservations of the "radical right", as well as the teachings of Henry George. But his understanding of George is so weak as to suggest that he studied him on a quick visit to the public library just before closing time. He refers to George's main work as "Poverty and Progress" and garbles the American reformer's diagnosis of poverty's causes as "unjust laws, warfare, excessive rents and lack of secure tenancies".

Superficially, *The Third Revolution* is an impressive work with extensive discussion of factors which affect the environment and man's ability to use intelligently the great reservoir of natural resources. But until he appreciates the significance of social injustice in the use of natural resources and the key importance of land ownership in particular, the author's efforts rise no higher than the academic and, in a practical world, are largely wasted.

* *Inside the Third World*, Penguin, 1979.

BIRTHRIGHT

*The Birthright of our Sires**
George Curtis, £5.75

GEORGE CURTIS tells his story of life in rural England when horses pulled the plough and men humped 18-stone sacks of wheat. Born the son of a Lincolnshire farmworker in 1925, he worked on the land until he was 34 and for 30 years following this was a full-time representative of the Farmworkers Union in the county.

Life in the country was primitive. Even as late as 1947 there was an earth closet outside the farm cottage which had to be emptied once a week. Drinking water was fetched from the village pump. A pig in the garden provided bacon. Crops were grown by rotation and all farming was organic.

In his youth he was an ardent Methodist preacher and his interest in religion is reflected in this book. Evocative photographs of Lincolnshire in the war years and the '50s and '60s are accompanied by a detailed examination of those times.

Curtis became interested in Henry George and the book is imbued with Georgist thought and ideas. He quotes a report he wrote in 1990 for a local TGWU conference. After referring to the effects of the property boom, he says: "A Land Value Taxation policy would not only kill off all such speculative advance at a stroke. It would restore to all equal, inalienable, God-given rights of access to the land denied by the Enclosure Acts which gave rise to the traditional rhyme:

They hang the man and flog the woman,
Who steal the goose from off the Common,
But let the greater criminal loose,
Who steals the Common from the goose."

As one who was always close to the land, perhaps he sees more clearly than most the effects of those Acts.

History, religion and Henry George are mixed in this book. The connections add weight to a slim volume - an interesting addition to the land value taxation literature.

* Published by the author at 23 Estate Ave., Broughton, Brigg, South Humberside DN20 OJY.

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