

## The double act that nearly made history

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### CHURCHILL: HIS RADICAL DECADE

by Malcolm Hill  
Othila Press, £20

WINSTON Churchill, a statesman of towering stature, is now remembered for his wartime achievements following his appointment as Prime Minister in 1940 and as a voice crying in the wilderness years before 1939 warning of the threat posed by Hitler's rise to power.

What has been forgotten is his radical early days when he espoused free trade and land value taxation with a passion, conviction and clarity of thought that has never been matched. We owe a debt of gratitude to Malcolm Hill for bringing this decade to life and shining a light on these aspects of this multi-dimensional genius.

A genius, it must be said, with flaws and inconsistencies. What happened to the ideals that carried him through a marathon campaign promoting LVT for the 1909 People's Budget as a Liberal to then see him as a Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1920s allowing the last remnants of it to slide into oblivion?

It is true that the LVT proposals had been badly drafted and did not work. The First World War took away the 14,500 valuation staff so that even the basis needed before any assessments could be made was never established.

Churchill could have set things in motion again after the war but he didn't. Malcolm Hill says that Churchill's love of the bright lights and ambition allowed the question to fade in his political thinking "as if it had been but a garment whose season had passed". Churchill himself wrote: "It is inevitable that frequent changes should take place in the region of action. A policy is pursued up to a certain point; it becomes evident at last that it can be carried no further. New facts arise which render it obsolete; new difficulties make it impracticable. A new, and possibly the oppo-

site, policy asserts itself with overwhelming force."

Lloyd George, who Malcolm Hill claims did not understand the case for the taxation of land values, never gave up promoting it. And, at least, he understood that his original proposals were flawed. In 1930 he drew the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer's attention to his own problems 20 years earlier: "I hope that he will read the Budget of 1909-10 in order to know what to avoid."

In the heady days of 1909 Lloyd George and Winston Churchill had been a kind of double act barnstorming the country with fiery speeches. Churchill's famous exposition of the land question given in Edinburgh that year is quoted in full in this book. He clearly drew the distinction between private and public value and the significance of total enclosure "...the land monopoly is not the only monopoly which exists, but it is by far the greatest of monopolies; it is a perpetual monopoly, and it is the mother of all other forms of monopoly."

Churchill's attention had first been drawn to the injustices in society by Seebohm Rowntree's *Poverty. A Study of Town Life*. Later he read and digested Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. His attack on the vested interests that were at the root of this poverty was made not without cost to himself.

Whereas Lloyd George had experienced and seen the suffering caused to his local community in Wales by landlords and responded with bitterness and heartfelt personal anger against them Churchill came from that very class. With his aristocratic background Churchill had to set himself against his family and class. As he confided to a friend: "What a wrench it is to me to break with all that glittering hierarchy." In the end when, after all their efforts, the budget

was passed into law, the LVT part of it was a damp squib. Instead of trying to get it right, as Malcolm Hill explains, the government had embarked on a policy of mitigating the effects of poverty and not tackling the causes. Both Churchill and Lloyd George were guilty of aiding and abetting this policy which led to the Welfare State instead of to a system of economic justice which would have made the Welfare State unnecessary.

I can recommend this book to anyone interested in seeing the tragedy of this failure and Churchill's part in it. It is an important work, and it is a pity that the author was not better served in its final production and sub-editing, but that is a minor cavil. This is a book for serious study and a lesson for future legislators.

