

A Family and the Land

V. H. BLUNDELL

SAVILLS: *A Family and a Firm** is a delightful book which traces the history of the Savill family from 1652, through the two World Wars and up to recent times with sympathy, admiration and humour. Following the fortunes of the early Savills as yeoman farmers, brick-layers, builders and ultimately surveyors, we are given the economic and political background of the times and a personal commentary on legislation and other events that related to land both urban and agricultural. The book is sprinkled with amusing anecdotes, is a "good read" and will interest more than just those in the landed professions.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal is the chapter, "Edwin Savill v. Lloyd George" which might just as appropriately have been entitled "The Land Union v. the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values." The battle arose from Lloyd George's "People's Budget" which contained proposals to levy certain land duties**. In the light of Labour's land legislation in recent years, these were quite mild. Also, as the author makes clear, they bore no resemblance to Henry George's proposals to tax all land values. None-the-less these land duties called for a valuation of land and landowners saw them as the thin end of the wedge.

The United Committee gave the proposals only limited and qualified support and continued to make the case for real land-value taxation. Seeing the dangers ahead, the landed interests formed the Land Defence League (later re-named the Land Union) to counter the United Committee's propaganda and in order to oppose the obnoxious land duties which eventually found their way (after much political upheaval) on to the statute book.

Edwin Savill, who was in the forefront of the battle, was vice-chairman of the Land Union for twenty-five years and his knowledge and skill was used to much effect in revealing the absurdities and deficiencies of the Bill.

The Chairman of the Land Union, Captain N. G. Pretyma, was a man of a different character, who, Mr. Watson explains, did not mince his words, and whose vituperations did not always succeed in winning friends. The purpose of the Land Union, Captain Pretyma said, was "to bring home to the country a sense of the injustice and mischievous character of the land taxes, which have introduced into politics a spirit of dishonesty . . . and a policy of confiscation

unknown in any other Parliament in this country or elsewhere."

Mr. Watson describes as unwarranted, the criticism of the Surveyors' Institution that it did not take more vigorous action in supporting the Land Union's propaganda in defence of landowners.

"The Surveyors' Institution, though most of its members were strongly opposed to the proposals, wisely confined itself to revealing and underlining some of the fallacies that underlay them and their technical, rather than political consequences. . . . The surveyor (or any other professional man), is entitled to his political opinions *as an individual* and free as such to express them. A professional society, comprising a party of persons whose opinions differ, must never enter the party political arena."

Reflecting on the ridiculous and unnecessary complications of the Bill, Mr. Watson asks if the parliamentary draftsman ever stops to ask himself: "What sort of a chap is an Inland Revenue valuer? Is he a human being with undoubted gifts, but subject to human limitations? Or is he a god-like creature in whom are collated the judgement of a Solomon, the discernment of an Aristotle, the imagination of a Michelangelo and the foresight of a Major Prophet?"

The author gives a fair and accurate summary of the aims and objects of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values and the philosophy of Henry George.

"It was a main plank of Henry George's platform that *individual* enterprise, *individual* effort and *individual* management should be encouraged." (This in explaining that George did not believe in land nationalisation). And of Lloyd George's land duties, Mr. Watson says "It is untrue to say, as do some who ought to know better, that the taxation of land values was tried under the 1910 Finance Act and failed."

Edwin Savill comes out well in the heated controversies which took place between the Land Union and the United Committee. He did not spare the



proponents of the land duties whom he lashed with his logic and facts but he was kinder to the United Committee. Although he could hardly be considered a convert to its views, he did propose

*John Watson, Hutchinson Benham, £4.50. (The author is a chartered surveyor, one time President of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and member of the Lands Tribunal.)

**See *Lloyd George's Land Taxes and Land Reform in Politics*. Send 10p stamp to Land & Liberty Press.

in a paper read to the Surveyors' Institution in February 1912, that the Institution "appoint a strong committee to investigate the principles of the taxation of land values, take evidence from persons with specialised knowledge, and produce an objective report."

John Watson observes, "This apparent *volte face* by the vice-chairman of a militant body at which, so recently, the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values had been hurling abuse, must have astonished his hearers. An indignant reader of the Land Agents' Record wrote sarcastically that Mr. Savill had 'described the schemes of the committee with a long name for confiscating the entire value of the bare land in a beautiful spirit of toleration.'"

If Edwin Savill had lived to see the results of the

1947 Town & Country Planning Act, the Land Commission, the Development Land Tax and the Community Land Act, we feel it would have taken little persuasion to convert him to L.V.T., if only in sheer desperation. If the land question is ever to be dealt with, this is the only way. The alternatives of wholesale nationalisation of urban and agricultural land hangs like the sword of Damocles over those who have resisted the practical and ethical proposals of Henry George for so long.

There is much more in this excellent book but of a less political nature. The author describes it thus: "It is in no sense a history book, still less a tapestry. I prefer to describe it as an irregular patchwork with the story of the Savills threaded through it and holding the bits together."

Turning Lemons into Grapefruit

SYDNEY BALL

WELL before American independence, many thousands of Europeans left their native heaths seeking freedom and opportunity in a continent populated largely by a few Indian tribesmen and an abundance of wild life; but above all, free land from one horizon to the next in all directions beckoned the adventurous and the persecuted.

During the early days of settlement, the main obstacles faced by the pioneering colonizers of America were a hostile environment and primitive communications. It says much for them that hardy men and women were prepared to suffer great deprivation and physical hardship in settling a wild and unknown territory, frequently having to contend with a great deal of disappointment from unfulfilled expectations. That many succeeded has resulted in modern America—a large, rich and powerful nation, dedicated to freedom and democracy.

The record of progress from independence in 1776 to the present day has not been unblemished. Americans have not always seen their legitimate interests served through the operation of natural justice; the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have not prevented the twin evils of land monopoly and industrial protection from flourishing—to the detriment of millions of its landless and property-less citizens. The growth of privilege has been

accompanied by widespread corruption, which has undermined many people's faith and confidence in the virtues of a market economy and the rule of law. During the development of modern America, it is arguable which has been the cause of more injustice and distress—the U.S. tariff or the maldistribution of "free" land. The late Thorold Rogers thought the tariff the cause of the greater mischief; while Henry George saw in the land question the fundamental villain. It is not my purpose here to enter into that particular argument. I happen to think that both have contributed to undermining the American dream of "the pursuit of happiness" in a land of equal opportunity and individual liberty.

The history of land ownership in America is, in itself, a fascinating study of how that country developed from a relatively uninhabited continent to the world's greatest industrial and largest democratic nation in less than 200 years—most of this industrial development taking place during the second half of its bi-centenary. Quite naturally, the first settlers wanted, above all else, land. Without land they had no more security than they had enjoyed in "the old country." If the problem had been limited to having access to any old piece of land, there would have been no problem at all—certainly not in Henry George's day. Even today, there is, without

doubt, available derelict land waiting to be claimed. The trouble is, life below the margin can often be a grim affair—even for freeholders. No one appreciated this important fact more than America's land barons and land speculators. Their *modus operandi* in seeking out the potentially rich land could not be better put than it is by Dana L. Thomas, who describes the process in his recent book, *Lords of the Land**, a history of American landlordism.

"There was no difficulty in finding land," says Thomas. "The trick was to select property that was *strategically located*. The astute speculator bought property for a song on the outskirts of a town, estimating that it lay squarely in the direction the community would grow. If he guessed right and the village became a metropolis, its acreage wound up in the heart of the city, and by subdividing it into lots, he or his heirs became multi-millionaires. Sometimes this happened within the lifetime of the original land buyer."

Timing is all. The trick is to be well ahead of the crowd, and then to wait patiently for the crowd to turn up. It is *people* that give land its value; lots of people, lots of land value! You could build the most magnificent city in the world; if the location was unacceptable, and no one came to inhabit it, it would remain a ghost-town, its land value, to all intents and purposes, nil.

America's land barons and real estate operators are as colourful a collection of rogues, adventurers

*Published by G. P. Putnam & Sons, New York, \$9.95.