

King of the Land Economists

DONALD DENMAN'S influence over the way in which land economics has been taught during the last two decades cannot be disputed.

Indeed, he has been crowned a king for his efforts!

For his field work with the Ibos—who tried to break away from Nigeria to form the independent state of Biafra—he was granted five kingly titles.

During a ritual ceremony he was bestowed the title of *Eze Di Igbo Mma*—King Beloved of the Ibo People.

He was also accorded the Order of Homayoun—the highest civil decoration that could be bestowed by the late Shah of Iran. He earned that decoration in 1974 for his contribution towards Iran's land reform programme.¹

THE PRESTIGE of the Department of Land Economy in Cambridge was created largely by the persistent efforts of Dr. Denman.

In 1968 the university approved the establishment of a Professorship of Land Economy. First occupant: Dr. Denman, who had pioneered the university's Land Economy Tripos.

He took pride in the particular approach to the subject which Cambridge was to develop under his guidance. He explained in 1968:

"The academic study of land affairs is unique in Cambridge in that we have bound together the teaching of law and economics. There are other departments in the country which teach on the subject, but they do not put emphasis on land law."

To what extent was this emphasis on the legal dimension conditioned by Dr. Denman's conservative ideology? The question cannot be answered here, but it clearly warrants careful biographical study by those interested in the way that education shapes the views of new generations.

DENMAN'S APPROACH has certainly been controversial. On one occasion, the paper he delivered to the Association of Municipal Corporations was described by the then Lord Mayor of Birmingham as "a piece of unadulterated political propaganda."

He had, indeed, seen a role for himself that stretched beyond the Cambridge cloisters and reached into mainstream politics.

In 1964, while he was building up the Department of Land Economy during its first 12 months of existence, he was energetically lobbying leading Tory politicians like Reginald Maudling and Boyd Carpenter.

He told me: "Since 1964 I have been discussing some of my thoughts, particularly about taxing land, with the leaders of the Tory Party. These issues were thrashed out by me with people of influence in the party."

"My view is that there is really no case for taxing land in a special way *per se*, as a tax.

"If you want to impose some charge on land as a social reform of some kind, that's a different matter. But if one is simply concerned with a fiscal issue, there is no case for taxing land in any different way from other forms of wealth."

THIS ESSENTIALLY conservative view has been planted right around the globe.

Dr. Denman's vigorous approach to his subject, and the quest to share his views with others, drew him into international activities.

Through his seminal work with universities in Ghana and Nigeria, the subject of land economy was developed in West Africa. The work in these centres has now been emulated elsewhere on the continent.

At the same time, the Cambridge influence expanded into other regions. Dr. Denman was asked by universities and governments—through agencies like the Commonwealth Secretariat—to help to create departments



Photo: Cambridge Evening News

● Professor Donald R. Denman

of land economy in Malaysia, the Caribbean, Australia, the South Pacific and Canada.

He retired from the Cambridge Professorship in 1978, but the globe-trotting goes on. He continues to advise governments on their land programmes. Just before last Christmas he returned from Tanzania, where he had studied the results of the *ujamaa* experiment.² He was not impressed. But whether President Julius Nyerere is likely to be steered onto a more fruitful path of development as a result of Dr. Denman's views on land remains to be seen.

REFERENCES

1. The Shah's attempt to redistribute land—before he was toppled by Ayatollah Khomeini—is described by Dr. Denman in his book *The King's Vista*.
2. Reviewed in the January/February 1981 issue of *Land & Liberty*.