

Between a rock and a dry place

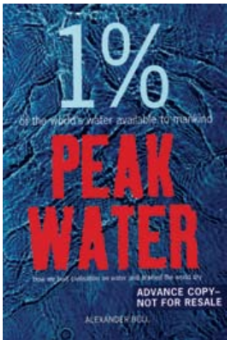
Peak Water by Alexander Bell Luath Press, 2009, 256pp, h/c, ISBN: 978-1906817190, £16.99

Peak water is the point at which the demand for water is higher than the rate at which the supply is replenished. Although water is a circulatory system—sea evaporation, atmospheric water vapour, cloud formation, rainfall, groundwater, drainage by river systems back to the sea—in fact because of intensive human use it behaves like a finite resource such as oil. It's not that the water's going to run out; it's just that there won't be enough available to meet needs; and specifically not enough in the locations where it's needed. The UK Environment Programme predicts that, by 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will be experiencing water stress, and 1.8bn people will be living with absolute water scarcity. Water is of course the source of life; and it is water, not land, the author argues, that is the building block of civilisation. "From the hanging gardens of Babylon and the ancient myth of the Nile to the fountains in Las Vegas, water is the one constant. We are fed by irrigated fields, live in plumbed cities, and turn on a tap without a moment's thought. Yet, this simple technology that underpins

everything is at bursting point." It is the places where water is, or can be got to, that are of value to us: or, perhaps more clearly, without a supply of water a place is of little value to us. And whether considered in terms of natural resource or of public distribution, a supply of water is a tapping into a common resource. Bell's book surveys the world and its history through a watery lense. He sees that there is a real problem in the mismatch between the locations of human populations and of fresh water. He reflects on the solutions (no pun intended): conflict—civil or international—conservation, or mass migration. He questions the possible efficacy of the first, advocates the necessity of the second and anticipates the inevitability of the third. What Bell does not do, although his arguments do lead the reader in this direction (and his back cover article in this L&L suggests it), is advance the notion of a market-based global-commons rent system for the management of the problem. The model would be Peter Barnes' Sky Trust—often raised in L&L—www.SKYOWNERS.ORG. That would be the efficient and just solution for the fair allocation of a scarce natural resource: it would ensure the universal distribution of clean fresh water according to human need; and collect for the common good the economic value of the best local industrial application of the remainder of any available supply. Alex Bell is a man who has

already proven himself in other fields and media: *Peak Water*, an incredibly interesting read, is a first book by an author who may go on to much more significant things.

Peter Gibb



Caring is not enough...

People First Economics by David Ransom & Vanessa Baird (eds) New Internationalist, 2009, 240pp, p/b, ISBN: 978-1-906523-23-7, £9.99 / \$16.95

Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Susan George and a host of (nineteen) other celebrated thinkers and writers from the left take "a long, hard look at the mess globalised capitalism is in",

and shift the focus "back to where it belongs—putting the needs of people and the environment first." Well I can't complain about the PR—but I do complain of the result. Between them all the authors succeed in pressing a few of the appropriate (mostly left-hand) buttons—tax justice, carbon taxes, the commons, stewardship—but they manage to ignite precisely nothing. This is a book by people who care deeply, but are as blinded as the Neo-liberalist Washington Consensus by their theoretical and ideological inheritance, denying what's in front of them, and floundering in their incomprehension of the solutions. Good luck to them...

Maxwell Lewis

...We have to do what is required

Don't Bet the House on It—No Turning Back to Housing Boom and Bust by Toby Lloyd Compass, 2009, 50pp, p/b £5—or available free by download from WWW.COMPASSONLINE.ORG.UK/PUBLICATIONS/

The London-based independent 'democratic left' thinktank Compass is a favourite of Gordon Brown. Toby Lloyd, the Henry George Foundation's previous

deputy chief executive, has authored the pressure group's latest report on housing. "As well as presenting a clear and comprehensive picture of how and why the housing system has failed us", Compass says, "the report provides an easily approachable discussion of the measures needed to get out of this mess and create an equitable, sustainable housing system that delivers the quality homes we all need at fair prices". And it does. The report opens with a review of the housing problem ("bubbles always burst"). It then sets out the principles for a new housing economy. The report goes on to deliver fifteen pages of comprehensive discussion of how housing policy needs to be reformed; including two pages on taxing land values, which conclude—"We do not underestimate the opposition from those with a vested interest in the unequal and ineffective outcomes of the market as it is currently structured, but as Churchill said, 'It is not enough that we do our best; sometimes we have to do what is required.' Taxing unearned land value increases is not just necessary but desirable and feasible." The report made UK front page news in August. *The Daily Express* headlined with 'Land tax "an attack on middle classes"'—reporting views of Tory housing spokesman Grant Shapps, who considered the idea 'thoroughly unappealing'. *The Express* also discussed the proposal in its Leader.

Ashley Seager in the *Guardian* took a different and more positive view, stating the report "makes a compelling case for a wholesale reform of the housing market in Britain, including a land value tax that would curb property speculation".

Peter Gibb

Calling our rights to mind

Community Land Rights: A Citizen's Guide by Andy Wightman Balalan House, 2009, 96pp, p/b, ISBN: 978-0956143815, £15

This short new book aims to assist citizens, activists and researchers investigate local land rights. It is the first comprehensive overview of land rights belonging to Scotland's communities. The book offers research sources and techniques including "how to interrogate the only-ever comprehensive map-based survey of landownership in GB and Ireland—the Lloyd George 1910 Land Valuation Survey", and a series of case studies, including Edinburgh's city centre Waverley Market (between the station and the Balmoral), and the Forest of Birse on Deeside.

Maggie Hold

a quick note ...

WWW.WIKIPEDIA.ORG

The greatest knowledge project of human civilisation—the multi-lingual, web-based, free-content, encyclopedia venture, based mostly on anonymous contributions—now at thirteen million articles. Go read the entry for your favourite subject: if you're not happy with it, put it right; if it's missing, write it yourself. Anyone can write and make changes to *Wikipedia*.

Land Reform in Russia: Institutional Design and Behavioral Responses by Stephen K Wegren, p/b, £40 (released 31st January 2010) "In Russia, a country controlling more land than any other nation, land ownership is central to structures of power, class division and agricultural production." This book is an account of the country's land reform initiatives from the late 1980s to the present day.

The Rule of Law by Kenneth Jupp, p/b, £ 14.95 "The challenge of the twenty-first century is how to establish access to the resources of the earth for the whole population so that the able-bodied can support themselves. The welfare state can then be slimmed down to no more than is necessary to provide for the diseased and disabled... with more generosity than at present."

Limits to Free Trade: Non-Tariff Barriers in the European Union, Japan and United States by David Hanson, h/c, £65.00 (released 31st December 2009) This book reviews the trade complaints being raised by the US, EU and Japan about each other and concludes that non-tariff trade barriers are being created more quickly than being resolved by trade liberalisation.

Maps—fields, paths, forests, blocks, places and surrounds by Nigel Peake, p/b £10 Peake's poetic cartography of memory, imagination and desire reminds us that not all we value is immediately concrete and measurable. Peake's 'pre-market' maps of "fictional realities" are a "delicate poise between politics and imagination", according to Tim Abrahams.

Land Value Taxation by Richard Dye and Richard England (eds) (Lincoln Institute) Taxation of Land Values and the Single Tax by William Smart After the Crash by Mason Gaffney (Wiley-Blackwell) The Community Land Trust Reader (to be published by the Lincoln Institute in 2010)