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HD **NONFICTION IN BRIEF**

BY By Richard Margolis

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WHO OWNS APPALACHIA? Landownership and Its Impact. By The Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force. Introduced by Charles C. Geisler. 235 pp. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky. \$25.

TD "Who Owns Appalachia?" - a pioneering look at real estate holdings in 6 states and 80 counties - provides yet another illustration of Populism's longevity. Though presented with all the ponderousness one might expect from a committee effort, the facts of the maldistribution of property seem disarmingly clear. Of the 13 million acres studied, nearly three-fourths were found to be in the hands of absentee owners, either corporations or Government agencies. Corporations alone held 70 percent of all mineral rights. Viewed from another angle, 1 percent of the owners controlled 53 percent of the land, a state of affairs that has contributed to the region's chronic poverty. "Somewhere we lost ourselves," a West Virginia farmer comments. "I think it was when the companies bought up the land."

Not surprisingly, the tax burden in Appalachia turns out to be similarly skewed, with 53 percent of the land generating only 13 percent of the property taxes collected. According to the authors, generally low assessments keep schools poor and cripple public services. Meanwhile, "Federal and state subsidies are poured into these 'needy' Appalachian counties to provide a minimal level of services . . . amidst growing, relatively tax-free exploitation of the region's resource wealth."

The authors offer few cures for the malady they describe, other than a heightened and more precise awareness of the unequal distribution of property. Their book seems part of the solution. As Charles C. Geisler, a sociologist at Cornell University, points out in his introduction, the study came into being not in academia but in Appalachian towns and villages, whose residents hoped to learn more about the inequities that enveloped them. The study, he says, is largely the work of community activists, the byproduct "of an American land reform movement and neo-populist spirit rekindled since the early 1970s." - R.J.M.

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