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Owning the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership
by Andro Linklater (review)

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battlefields in France. To a good friend Cather wrote, “You see I absolutely know this; some of him still lives in me, and some of me is buried in France with him.” This book, eventually titled *One of Ours*, went on to win the Pulitzer Prize.

In her long life (1873–1947), Cather penned twelve novels. While she broadened her canvas to write novels like *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, set in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and *Shadows on the Rock*, set in Quebec, she always researched deeply to provide the color and detail for people and places. Cather’s letters vividly capture the artist at work over the span of six decades. And from the earliest letters to the last, there is a sparkling intensity. In a letter to her beloved brother Roscoe in 1938, wherein she grieved the death of a close friend, she wrote, “As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places—cared too hard. It made me, as a writer. But it will break me in the end.” This creative tension characterized Willa Cather’s letters and her life and makes reading her a pleasure.

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Andro Linklater, *Owning the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. 496 pp. \$30.00.

This is a difficult book to review, or even summarize. While it is mainly about the development of unencumbered individual land ownership, it ranges widely in geography—from Europe to China to the Ottoman Empire to the United States to South Korea, with plenty of stops in between. It also covers a wide swath of time, from the Middle Ages to the present day. And while it is mainly about land ownership, it takes a number of side excursions, ending up with visits to the financial crisis of 2008 and issues of intellectual property. Whether all of this indicates that Andro Linklater is an erudite renaissance scholar or an undisciplined dilettante—and I think he’s a bit of both—it is quite a wild ride.

Linklater devotes much of his attention to the wide varieties of land ownership that have existed and still exist in the world. These include family and/or group ownership, such as practiced by Indigenous peoples such as American Indians. Autocratic ownership, in which people on the land enjoyed some rights but in which a dynasty or the state held technical own-

ership, is also covered. Linklater also explores at some length ownership of land that contained people over whom some ownership rights existed, as in serfdom. And he discusses ownership that was complicated by encumbrances such as quitrents or entail.

Individual land ownership, minimally encumbered, is Linklater's favorite, and he sees it developing in England beginning in the Middle Ages. As individuals owned and, more important, controlled the land, they made it more productive, enabling more people to be fed and clothed more cheaply and allowing the generation of profits and capital that enriched the country and spurred industrialization. Equally significant, private landowners formed a social and political interest group that curbed the crown, upholding the rights of Englishmen and maintaining a strong and independent legislative role. There was a price to be paid—especially by the poor in the form of common rights sacrificed—but overall private ownership benefited Britain and most of its people. For those reasons, John Locke, Adam Smith, and other forward thinking Britons had praised individual ownership and control of land. However, champions of private ownership did not embrace that system unreservedly. While they believed in property rights, they did not think those should be absolute, and they agreed that when the private property system brought more public harm than good it must be modified in the public interest.

Linklater does not devote a lot of attention to the United States, and only a portion of that deals with the Midwest, but we generally fit his template of societies that did land ownership right. The Midwest was settled by farmers who either came from societies that had a fee-simple ownership system or who desired to be in one that did. Land ownership was fairly widespread and roughly equal in the early Midwest, and political and social institutions were dominated by white male landowners. In this way the region fit the model envisioned by the framers, who believed that republicanism should be rooted in an independent population that was not characterized by extremes of wealth or poverty. Midwestern land was usually productive and the farmers worked hard, creating surpluses and investment capital for industry and internal improvements. All of this could be said to have served the public and private interests simultaneously, but government did not trust that would happen automatically. Hence, the federal government used midwestern land to encourage the construction of railroads and other infrastructure, support public education, and create a system of land grant colleges.

Linklater's treatment is most effective when he is dealing with land, but

of course land is no longer the main form of wealth, even in the Midwest, and hasn't been for a long time. His excursions into such areas as the 2008 financial crisis and modern notions of intellectual property indicate that he understands that, and that he is trying to compensate, but he ends up simply adding a couple of lean-tos onto an already ramshackle structure. You can learn a lot of interesting things by reading *Owning the Earth*, but few of them will be relevant to the Midwest.

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Thomas W. Devine, *Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 408 pp. \$27.95.

Thomas Devine's profile of the presidential campaign of former vice president Henry Wallace in 1948 should be required reading for any student of political and social movements. Lucidly written, Devine has mined numerous archival sources to reconstruct the Iowan Wallace's failure to strike a chord with voters and his stark indifference to the fact that the Progressive Party, which he led, was dominated by members of the Communist Party (CP). Devine's convincing portrayal of Wallace's prophetic mission as the leader of Gideon's Army—as progressives referred to their own movement—showcases the limitations of prophetic leaders in politics, especially when their prophecies were screeds written and developed by CP members.

Wallace admirers and biographers have long lauded the candidate's stand on a variety of issues in 1948, including the emerging Cold War consensus on the need to contain the Soviet Union; the racial issues and segregation in the South; and Wallace's support for the working man and unions. But on all three of these issues, and with devastating effect, Devine shows how Wallace's mission failed to move the electorate. In fact, on almost every major issue, Wallace echoed the communist party line, sounding more like a red activist in New York's Union Square labeling Wall Street and their political supporters as fascists, segregationist Democrats as fascists, and Harry Truman and the supporters of a hostile policy toward the cold war as warmongers, and, you guessed it, fascists. Many of his speeches and statements were written by John Abt, a "concealed communist," as Devine describes those subordinate to party discipline while working for