



# The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

## The Highland Clearances

### Brief account of events

From their very inception, the Highland Clearances have been among the most controversial subjects in modern Scottish history. There is no historical or contemporary consensus on the clearances – their causes, methods and results, both in the short and long term – and picking a path through this controversial area can be problematic. Much recent historical work has been done on the subject, however, so there is no shortage of material for the interested reader. We start here with a very brief account of the key events, from c.1750 to the twentieth century:

#### **1750-1780: Agricultural change and 'Improvement' in a British context**

Although often associated with resistance to change or 'progress', the Scottish Highlands had experienced revolutionary change in the eighteenth century. After the convulsions of the Jacobite rising and Culloden (1745-6), a new ethos of agricultural, economic and social 'Improvement' spread across the region, led by a handful of prominent improving landowners (Sir John Sinclair of Ulster, for example), professional surveyors and writers. Examples of estate improvement were set by the Forfeited Estates, the 11 estates forfeited and administered by the government as punishment for prominent landowners who had taken up the Jacobite cause. Drainage, enclosure, consolidation of larger farms, the introduction of new stock (sheep over black cattle, principally) and crop rotation became widespread. Essentially, Highland estates were being re-drawn along commercial lines, with increasing rents the target for owners and managers. This process had been in place from the seventeenth century, but the pace of change accelerated after 1746; the scene was set for a grander re-organisation, this time, of the population.

#### **1780-1825: the 'First Wave' of clearances and Sutherland**

The 'first wave' of clearances began as early as the 1780s and continued into the wake left by the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. Initially, the intention of most estate owners had been to retain and re-deploy the population to other parts of their estates, principally the coastal fringes so they could effectively prosecute the fishing and kelping industries; but later many evicted people entirely, disregarding relocation. Essentially, there was a great deal of variation, even within the 'first wave' of clearances, as to intention, execution and results.

An (in)famous example of the clearance policy can be seen on the Sutherland estates, between 1809 and 1821. The one million acre estate was owned by the Countess of Sutherland, who had made an advantageous marriage to Lord Stafford, one of the wealthiest men in the British Isles. With her husband's investment and the ideological and organisational talent of her commissioner, James Loch,

the Countess embarked on a comprehensive series of clearances, eventually relocating nearly 15,000 people. Their land in the interior was converted to sheep walks which brought high commercial returns and a new parallel crofting economy was established on the coastal fringes. The scale of these clearances was staggering, in cost and number of people involved, but the methods used to evict, associated with the vilified Patrick Sellar, made them stand out to both contemporaries and historians since.

The Sutherland clearances, despite being atypical in many ways, have come to symbolise the entire sweep of clearances in the early nineteenth century.

## **1825-1855: the 'Second Wave' of clearances and the Great Highland Famine**

After the great re-organisations of the 1800s and 1810s there was some consolidation on Highland estates, as managers and owners hoped the crofting population would bed-down into their new lots and employment (principally fishing and the production of kelp). The broader economic climate was adverse, however; the end of the Napoleonic wars brought tumbling prices, returning soldiers and a swift end to the dominance of kelp in the Highland economy. Poverty for the small tenants deepened, in spite of the Improvers' predictions of economic stability; a serious warning shot came in 1836-7 when a potato blight hit the region, to be followed in 1846-8 with an even more serious subsistence crisis, recognised by contemporaries as the Great Highland Famine. Only the efforts of charities, landlords and the state prevented widespread mortality among the destitute population, and crofting rents collapsed. Many Highland landowners were bankrupted, but others saw the crisis as an opportunity to re-organise their estates along more profitable lines (most famously on the Duke of Argyll's estate). Some historians have identified this as the 'second wave' of clearance, where landowners, dismayed by the destitution of their small tenantry (something which the ideology of the 'first wave' of clearances was meant to prevent), evicted the poorest class of small tenants and occasionally arranged, and paid for, emigration out of the region altogether.

## **1886 and beyond: the Crofters War and legislative atonement**

Economic conditions stabilised after c.1855, and up to the 1870s, the Highland population experienced more favourable market conditions – rising prices for their goods and stable rent levels. This period of 'relative prosperity' came to an abrupt end in the winter of 1880-1, when a general agricultural depression began to bite, and terrible storms battered the region, with significant economic effects. Perhaps in part inspired by events in Ireland, crofters on the Macdonald estate on Skye resisted attempts by the landlord to remove sections of their grazings at Braes in April 1882, and the Crofters War began. This time, crofter protest and resistance spread across the region, affecting Skye, Lewis, Tiree and parts of western Sutherland particularly hard. Added to this was support from urban Scotland and a broadly sympathetic Liberal government under W. E. Gladstone. In 1883 he appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the claims of the crofters under Lord Napier, and this provided the historical and contemporary basis of state intervention in 1886, with the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act. This benchmark piece of legislation gave the Highland crofters security from eviction, the benefit of their improvements and set up a court, the Crofters Commission, to set crofters' rents, adjudicate on arrears and facilitate extensions to crofts. This Act was followed in 1897 with the Congested Districts (Scotland) Act, which legislated for state land purchase on behalf of crofters and investment into the transportation and agricultural networks of the region, and then by Small Landholders (1911) and Land Settlement Acts (1919) aimed at addressing (with mixed success) the chronic land hunger of the region, which many blamed on the clearances of a century ago.

# Changing Perspectives:

## Origins – Alexander Mackenzie to Prebble

One of the first, and certainly most influential, texts written on the history of the Highland clearances was the book of that name by Alexander Mackenzie, an Inverness-based journalist and newspaper editor. He collected together a broad range of contemporary reports on the clearances of the early nineteenth century (nearly all less than complimentary about the clearance policy and its results) and published them as a single volume in the early 1880s, at the height of the crofters' agitation in the region. It constituted a highly-charged critique of Highland landlordism and exposed the sufferings of the cleared population.

Mackenzie's book set the tone for much of the published work on the Highland clearances up to the 1970s. The seemingly-intractable social and economic problems the region faced, particularly in the interwar period, lent Mackenzie and later authors' analysis weight. Tom Johnston, the Scottish socialist and later, government minister, published a broadside against the Scottish aristocracy generally, and Highland landowners in particular in his 1909 book, *Our Scots Noble Families*. This debate was intensified in 1969 with the publication of John Prebble's *The Highland Clearances*, an accessible, entertaining and best-selling account of the subject, which famously denounced the clearing landlords of the Highlands.

## Key changes

By the 1970s, influenced by ideological changes in the academic profession at large, historians began to look at the Highland clearances from other angles, principally economics and demographics. These historians (such as Malcolm Gray's in his seminal, *The Highland Economy*, 1957) asked fundamental questions about the Highland economy and population and put the clearances into the context of industrialisation and urbanisation.

From 1976, the work of James Hunter brought the focus back to the crofting community, based on a full academic apparatus of both archival and oral sources. Hunter continued the long tradition of condemnation of Highland landlordism, blaming them for stymieing the Highland economy for two hundred years, and interpreted the process as 'class war'; for Hunter, the only resolution was state intervention.

Modern historiography of the clearances has opened up new fields of research and tapped previously ignored sources of evidence. Archaeological research on clearance sites, the work of historical geographers on the chronological shifts in the Highland economy, the use of estate archives and some more detailed work on Highland population history have all added to the bank of knowledge about the clearances.

Latterly, historians have opened up the areas of protest and government intervention in the Highlands (E. A. Cameron), the role of church ministers in Highland society (A. W. MacColl), the perspective of the landed estates (A. Tindley) and the influence of the Irish Land War on Highland events (A. G. Newby). Historical biography has also been utilised to great effect, particularly in E. Richards' magisterial, *Patrick Sellar and the Highland Clearances*. The extent to which this new research has contributed to the public and political contemporary debate

## Documentary record

A plethora of contemporary sources are available for the interested scholar to use, although they are scattered across the country. One of the most valuable types of source material for the Highland clearances are the documentary archives of Highland estates; many collections of estate papers remain in private hands, although surveys of most have been completed by the National Register of Archives for Scotland. Additionally, some key collections have been placed in public hands, in the National Archives of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland (for example, the Sutherland estates papers, the Cromartie papers, Reay estate papers). Lastly, some collections of estate papers in the clearance period have been collected, edited and published under the auspices of the Scottish History Society series. Estate papers provide the historian with the most systematic account of clearance policy and implementation.

Local newspapers, often long-established, carry significant material on the clearances and their aftermath, in particular; the Northern Times, the Military Register, the Scotsman, the Oban Times and the Inverness Courier. For sources giving the small tenants' perspective, the work of Donald Meek in collection and translation is vital (see for example D. Meek, *Tuath is tighearna: tenants and landlords* (Edinburgh, 1995). Government inquiries, reports and legislation throughout the nineteenth century also make fascinating reading; one of the most important when looking at the clearances is the evidence given to the 1883 Napier Commission, much of which was retrospective in character.

## Key Figures

### Patrick Sellar (1780-1851)

Patrick Sellar is perhaps the individual most closely associated with the Highland clearances; as one of the most successful evictors and sheep farmers, accused but acquitted of culpable homicide, he is also one of the most vilified characters in Scottish history. Sellar first came to prominence when he was employed by the Countess of Sutherland to coordinate large-scale clearances in Sutherland, which he undertook with gusto – not least because he would later rent the cleared lands himself for large-scale commercial sheep farming. He was, however, a difficult character, and came into conflict with both the Sutherland people and his employers, not least the Countess and her commissioner, James Loch. He ran into serious trouble in 1816 when accusations were made against him of culpable homicide and he was tried, but eventually acquitted, at Inverness. After the trial, Sellar settled into the life of a successful and wealthy sheep farming tenant on the Sutherland estate, a vocation he apparently excelled at. Although he escaped legal sanctions, Sellar (and his descendents) never escaped recurrent public v

### Donald McLeod (?-1860)

Donald McLeod was born in Rossal, Strathnaver, Sutherland (date of birth unknown) and would become one of the most damaging critics of the clearances on the Sutherland estate. In 1814 he was an eye-witness to clearances in Strathnaver, carried out by Patrick Sellar; later he trained as a stone mason and emigrated to Canada. In the early 1840s, McLeod launched an unprecedented attack on the Sutherland estate via a series of letters published in the *Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle*, which claimed to be direct eye-witness accounts of the Strathnaver clearances of the 1810s. In 1857, motivated by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), which included favourable impressions of the Sutherland

family, McLeod re-published his letters in book form (*Gloomy Memories in the Highlands of Scotland*), plus a full rejection of Beecher Stowe's arguments. McLeod died in Ontario in 1860.

### **James Loch (1780-1855)**

James Loch, the 'Sutherland Metternich' was educated at Edinburgh in law, but would carve out a remarkably successful career as an estate manager and MP. He also stood at the head of a noted Loch 'dynasty' which remained influential throughout the nineteenth century in the fields of estate management, governance and the military. His role in the Highland clearances was as architect and apologist for the Countess of Sutherland from 1812. Although clearances had begun in Sutherland before his appointment, Loch organised them on a more extensive footing, and additionally published (in 1820) *An Account of the improvement ethos and its results in practice on the estates of his employer*, a book which has remained a key text for those interested in the clearances. He combined this work with parliamentary duties as MP for Wick Burghs, and the Loch influence on Sutherland continued after his death in 1855, when his son, George, also trained in law, took over the commissionership until his own death in 1879.

### **Sir John Sinclair (1754-1835)**

Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster was a Caithness landowner born in Thurso, who would rise to become one of the most energetic and influential figures in Highland and Scottish 'improving' agriculture and social inquiry. He is best known today for sponsoring and organising the great social and economic survey *The Statistical Account of Scotland (Old Statistical Account)*, based on information collected from parish ministers and published in 21 volumes from 1791-99. He was also a passionate improver and promoter of scientific agriculture; he belonged to many continental and British agricultural societies and was energetic in putting new systems in place on his own estate. Sinclair was convinced that the population on his estate could be re-deployed and that the introduction of sheep would not entail any diminishment of the numbers of small tenants. He was one of the first landowners in Caithness to introduce commercial sheep farming, a policy which led to large scale evictions on his lands and the creation of clearance villages (Badbea, for example) on the coastal fringes of his estates. Sinclair is a key figure in the history of the Highland clearances for his contribution to the development of the improving ideology behind them, and putting that ideology into practice.

## Suggested reading

### **Classic studies and texts**

- A. Mackenzie, *The History of the Highland Clearances* (Inverness, 1883)
- A. H. Miller (ed.) *A Selection of the Forfeited Estates Papers preserved in H M General Register House and elsewhere* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1909)
- E. R. Creegan, *Argyll Estate Instructions* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1964)
- J. Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (Harmondsworth, 1969)
- R. J. Adam (ed.), *Papers on Sutherland Estate Management, 1780-1820*, 2 vols., (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1972)
- E. Richards, *The Leviathan of Wealth: the Sutherland fortune in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1973)
- J. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976)

## Most recent books

- E. Richards, Patrick Sellar and the Highland Clearances: homicide, eviction and the price of progress (Edinburgh, 1999)
- E. A. Cameron, Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c.1880-c.1925 (East Linton, 1996)
- A. Macinnes, Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart (East Linton, 1996)
- E. Richards, The Highland Clearances (Edinburgh, 2000)
- E. Richards, Debating the Highland Clearances (Edinburgh, 2007)