



The Rise of Highland Landlordism

Land ownership in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland has long been a controversial issue, dominated by the upheaval and injustices of the 18th and 19th centuries. These upheavals left a deep imprint on the consciousness of the people, and had a profound effect on the social and economic history of the crofter communities. There is still a strong awareness that many of the present inadequacies have their roots in the injustices of the past.

In order that we may be able to understand the attitude and claims of the crofter population to possessory rights in the land of their forefathers, and their reaction to the clearances and land raiding that took place in Park and elsewhere, we attempt to set forth briefly the historical background and principles on which the crofters and the landless cottars based their claims to the land.

In ancient times the Highland clansmen had collective possessory rights in the land within the territory occupied by the clan. There is no evidence to indicate that the patriarchal clan chief had any absolute rights of ownership of the clan territory vested in him personally.

On the contrary what happened was that the clansmen, who usually gained possession of their territory by the might of the sword, vested in the office of the clan chief, as head of the family or clan, the necessary powers to administer the clan lands of behalf of the clan.

It is not to be inferred from that arrangement, that the clan chief as an individual possessed any powers of exclusive ownership of the clan territory, similar to that claimed by them in the 18th century when they took over full control of the clan lands and became landowners. Certainly the principle of communal ownership in the land in the Highlands and Islands was gradually eroded over a long period of time, by the granting of charters and the imposition of feudalism on the Highland clan society by the King and a Parliament that was not representative of the people, but of vested interests. The main vested interest in parliament was the landed interest as represented by large landowners, but as long as the clansmen were armed they disregarded these charters, as being of no relevance to the real situation in the Highlands.

There were political and economic forces at work, over which the common people had no control as their voice was never heard in Parliament because the franchise was restricted, as may be illustrated by the increase of nearly 500% in the figures of Ross & Cromarty, from 1,720 persons in the election of 1880 to 10,265 persons in the election of 1885 following the passing of the Franchise Act of 1884, giving the vote to the ordinary people for the first time.

Despite the fact that many of the Highland people were not in favour of the restoration of the Jacobite House of Stewart and did not participate in the Jacobite rising of 1745, the Government unleashed a savage repressive policy against the Highland people following the collapse of that rising. The repressive policy was aimed at what the government regarded as civilising the Highland people and destroying the military power of the old clan society, and even the language and dress of the people was a conscious target for destruction.

British Government policy in the Highlands at that time was reminiscent of their arrogant colonial policy of imperial expansion in order to civilise these various people, whereas in actual fact they were impoverishing these people both economically and culturally. An element of colonialism continued in the attitude of central government to the Highlands over the years.

By the beginning of the 19th century the patriarchal clan system was finally undermined and it disintegrated, and the old social order in the Highlands was gone. The clansmen were disarmed during these difficult times of repressive government policy and the clan chiefs changed sides because they concluded that their position and status as heads of their respective clans were no longer sustainable in the new demilitarised society imposed on the Highland people. Accordingly they stepped in and assumed full personal control of the clan lands, despite the fact that communal ownership of the land was long accepted and the clan chiefs only held the land on behalf of their clans as the fruits of the clan sword. The British Government encouraged the clan chiefs in their plundering of the clan lands in order to further government policy of pacifying the Gaelic Highlands, by bringing them in line with the southern system of large private landowners.

The clan chiefs succumbed to the temptation to grab the clan lands in order to maintain their prestige and influence and sustain the extravagant lifestyle, to which they as clan chiefs, had by then become accustomed as

they gallivanted between the Highlands and fashionable city society, mingling increasingly with the so-called aristocratic society of the south and adopting their lifestyle and language.

In that way a new breed of anglicised chiefs, turned lairds, had arisen, educated in the south where they were as much, if not more, at home in French and English as they were in their native Gaelic language. They were therefore without pride in their Highland heritage and they did not understand or sympathise with the indigenous Highland population.

By claiming the traditional clan lands as their own private possessions, and adopting the new role of large private landowners, the clan chiefs betrayed the absolute trust the clansmen traditionally placed in the patriarchal leaders. In that way the clansmen were bitterly disillusioned by these events, at a time when they were depending on their leaders for much needed support and leadership to sustain them in their hour of suffering in the face of the British Government's repressive policy in the Highlands.

Once the former clan chiefs consolidated their new position as landowners of thousands and thousands of acres of clan lands, their next move as capitalist landowners was to organise their Highland estates on commercial lines, in order to raise more and more money to finance their extravagant lifestyle and so-called status as society socialites.

As men of the world, the former clan chiefs were well-aware of the economic changes that were taking place in Britain in the 18th century, where the whole society was in a process of change, with industrialisation, imperialism and the accumulation of wealth, going hand-in-hand with the expropriation of the peasants' lands, which was being organised into large farms on commercial lines. The peasants themselves were being exploited on low wages in the factories.

In the Highlands, the intrusion of a commercial landowning class was completely alien to the concept of a kinship-based society and the transition from the old clan system of society to the new crofting system under private landowners was taking place. That change in the Highlands introduced a new class division of privileged and servile. Gone forever was the sense of clanship and loyalty to the patriarchal leader as the focus of the people's allegiance, and in its place came a demoralised and dispirited feeling as the new regime demanded obedience, sometimes putting them in a state of slavish fear. All that had a profound effect on the people, who felt helpless, cowed and submissive and lacking in self-confidence to organise any resistance for a long, long time. It is often said that only now are we recovering our self-confidence after these traumatic events in our history.

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Date:

Original document title: The Rise of Highland Landlordism

Location in physical archive: Series F, File 9, Section 4

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/6/13

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