

## The Emergence of Landlordism in the Highlands and Islands

The union of the Crowns of Scotland and England took place in 1603, followed about 100 years later by the union of the Parliaments in 1707. At that time the people of substance and status considered that these events were a victory for progress. Ordinary people did not have a vote as it was 176 years later that the Franchise Act of 1884 was passed, increasing the total electorate of the British Isles from three to five million, and the electorate of Ross and Cromarty (including Lewis at that time) by 500% from 1,720 to 10,265. The 1918 Franchise Act increased the electorate still further.

In the absence of the vote, and both a good education and independent free press, the ordinary people were neither well informed nor consulted. In the Highlands and Islands the people were represented in parliament by landlords or their sons, until the General Election in 1885 when several crofter Members of Parliament were returned for Highland constituencies.

In the circumstances there were rumblings of discontent in the Highlands from time to time. One such event was the Jacobite rising of 1745, the initial success of which alarmed the Government, and when the Highland clansmen suffered a setback at Culloden in 1746, the Westminster Government adopted a policy of savage repression of the Highland people, including the disarming of the clansmen irrespective of whether they were in favour of the restoration of the Jacobite House of Stuart or not.

Under that severe pressure, the old social order in the Highlands and Islands disintegrated and in its place private landlordism was imposed on the Highland community. These changes in Highland society introduced a new class division of privileged and servile. Gone forever was the clansmen sense of kinship and loyalty to a patriarchal clan chief, and in its place came a demoralised feeling of helplessness and a slavish fear of the cruel landlord regime which demanded absolute obedience.

The new owners of the soil in the Highlands and Islands set in motion plans to develop and exploit the natural resources of the Highlands, including the indigenous people, in order to generate the maximum income for the landowning class. The ancient communal runrig clan system of land tenure was replaced by the crofting system of land tenure, so as to gain direct control over the smallholder population who were in future to hold their land tenure direct from the private landowners, who would then be able to fix their annual rent and move them about at will, hence the Highland Clearances.

The middlemen / tacksmen were dismissed and the lucrative kelp industry in which many of them were involved was taken over by the landlord class. In order to consolidate their position and gain absolute control over that industry the new landlords' established legal rights to the seaweed that grew on the shores of their estates, as well as the seaware that was cast upon their shores by the wind and the sea. That, together with their control of the crofters gave the landlords absolute control over the raw material and the crofter labour force that was necessary to exploit the profitable kelp industry.

The indigenous crofter class was often moved from the best areas of land and in their place the landlords established large commercial sheep farms, which they leased to south country sheep farmers, who were willing to pay exorbitant rents for the extra land that would help them to meet the ever increasing demand for mutton and wool, coming from the new towns and cities that were springing up in the south as a result of the Industrial Revolution.

In that way, there were political and economic forces at work in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century over which the ordinary people had no control, as their voice was never heard in the Country's unrepresentative Parliament which was comprised mainly of landed and other vested interests. Among other things the ancient Highland principle of communal ownership and occupation of the land resources was gradually eroded by the imposition of feudalism on the Highland clan society.