

Traditionally, the Highland Clearances have been seen as a uniform process involving wholesale eviction and loss of rights. But was the social distress and poverty of the Highlands a consequence or cause of population displacement? And why did this agrarian modernisation leave a legacy of such bitterness? Tom Devine presents the results of his own, and others', recent research findings to answer these and related questions. He argues that the Clearances were far from uniform in either origin or effect.

The Highland Clearances

The Highland Clearances were the process by which between c. 1760 to c. 1860 the inhabitants of entire districts in the Scottish Highlands and Islands were displaced and evicted from their lands. It is one of the classic themes of Scottish history but also of much more general historiographical significance. The subject offers an unrivalled opportunity for an examination of the social consequences of agrarian modernisation. The Clearances bring into particularly sharp focus the titanic conflict between the forces of peasant traditionalism and agrarian rationalism. All the great themes are there: the powers of the landed classes; the constraints of economic and demographic pressure; dispossession; peasant resistance; cultural alienation; migration and emigration.

Before the clearances

Any assessment of the social impact of the Clearances vitally depends on some reckoning of conditions in the Highlands before the evictions began. Nineteenth century critics argued that the majority of the population lived a secure and relatively comfortable existence which was later irreparably damaged by dispossession. Modern research has painted a quite different picture. Before 1750 the evidence suggests that the northern region, even by the standards of the rest of Scotland, was very poor; that its economy was precariously balanced between meagre sufficiency and intermittent shortage; that destitution was widespread and the people endured a constant struggle in a land of uncertain climate, limited arable resources and poor natural endowment. The Clearances did not in themselves cause Highland poverty; that was an inevitable fact of life, long before the later eighteenth century [Richards (1), Gray (2)].

Varieties of clearance

The great evictions are commonly viewed in particularly stark and simple terms. It is still widely held that the Clearances refer to the process of wholesale expulsion of entire communities through the use of especially brutal methods, in order to clear land for the formation of large sheep ranches. While such a description does have validity when applied to many evictions at certain periods, it is essentially an oversimplification of a much more complex social development. Easy generalisation is impossible because each 'clearance' had individual characteristics dictated by landlord attitudes, and the varied influence of demographic and economic pressures.

Some removals occurred through a discreet and gradual thinning of the ranks of the small tenantry in the manner reminiscent of many other parts of Britain in the age of agricultural improvement [see REFRESH 3]. There were striking differences in the scale, speed and modes of

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dispossession. Eviction was only one of a series of sanctions employed: others included confiscation of the cattle stock of those in arrears; controls over subdivision of land; refusal of famine relief. Some proprietors went to considerable lengths to accommodate displaced populations; others evicted without compunction or concern for the social costs of their actions. In the later eighteenth century it was common to plan for a redistribution of the population; after c. 1820 the strategy more often became one of an undisguised determination to expel. These different approaches were responses to the varied economic and social incentives and pressures of the period 1760-1860. They ensured that the phrase 'the Highland Clearances' is an omnibus term to include any kind of displacement by Highland landlords; it does not discriminate between small and large evictions, voluntary and forced removals, or between outright expulsion of tenants and re-settlement' [Richards (1)].

Process of change

The fact that the Clearances were far from homogeneous either in origin or effect renders meaningful analysis very difficult. Some attempt, however, can be made to categorise them roughly in a more coherent manner in order to move towards a definition of particular phases and types of eviction. In very broad terms, therefore, five classes of clearance may be identified.

(i) *The southern and eastern Highlands. Between c. 1780-c. 1830, along the arable fringes of the Highlands in eastern Inverness, southern Argyllshire, Easter Ross and parts of Sutherland, the existing structure was dissolved and replaced by a pattern of larger farms, held by one man, employing wage labourers. Alongside the new order emerged a 'croft' or smallholding system which became a source of seasonal labour for the large units and also an efficient means of bringing marginal land into steady cultivation. Eviction of small tenants and sub-tenants was a central part of the process but these 'clearances' had less harmful results than elsewhere because the new agriculture was founded on a combination of mixed husbandry and*

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pastoral specialisation. Thus the dispossessed were often absorbed within the labour-intensive regime of arable cropping or in the developing crofting structure [Gray (2)].

(ii) *Cattle farming.* For the most part the rearing of black cattle for sale in southern markets was accommodated within the traditional economic and social structure of the Highlands. This was in contrast to commercial sheep-farming which almost from its inception fell under the control of capitalist farmers from the Lowland and Border counties. Nevertheless, in some districts, extensive cattle ranches were established in response to external market pressures and many small tenants in consequence turned out of their holdings. This pattern was widely noted in a significant number of parishes in Dunbartonshire, Argyll and Perth as early as the 1750s [Richards (1)].



(iii) *The creation of the Croft System.* Throughout the western mainland north of the Ardnamurchan peninsula and the inner and outer Hebrides, the existing system of joint tenancies and communal agriculture was terminated between c. 1760 and c. 1840. This region afforded only limited possibilities for arable or mixed farming and therefore lacked the potential for the moderate land consolidation and the formation of medium-sized farms characteristic of the southern and eastern Highlands and the Scottish Lowlands. Here the landlord strategy was devoted to the formation of individual smallholdings or 'crofts' which were allocated in 'townships' or crofting settlements [Hunter (3)]. It is important to stress that this change did not destroy the peasant class though it did dramatically affect status, size of holding and local distribution of population. Essentially it perpetuated the connection with land and, within the croft system, subdivision of units among kinfolk became commonplace. Yet, while the formation of the new structure did not possess the drama associated with the more notorious evictions for sheep farming, it did result in substantial disruption, displacement and relocation of population. Over less than two generations it transformed the entire social map and pattern of settlement of the western Highlands and islands. One expression of the social

resentment which the process produced was the great wave of transatlantic emigrations which were triggered by it after c. 1760 and which predated the arrival of the large sheep farms by several decades [Bumstead (4)].

(iv) *Sheep-farming.* Commercial sheep-farming penetrated the southern and eastern counties of the region in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. After 1800 the pace of development quickened significantly. Inverness had a sheep stock of 50,000 at that date; by 1880 it had reached 700,000. The speed of expansion in Sutherland was even more rapid. That county had only about 15,000 sheep in 1811 but 130,000 nine years later. Almost inevitably pastoral husbandry practiced on this huge scale would result in far-reaching population displacement. Commercial pastoralism was conducted most efficiently in large units: the conventional wisdom had it that the most economical ratio was a single shepherd to 600 sheep. Again, the big farmers who controlled the business required the low-lying areas of arable on which the peasant communities clustered. At the very core of their operations was the vital need for suitable land for wintering in the harsh climate of the northern mountains. On this depended both the quality and the quantity of stock which they could maintain. The consequence was a sweeping increase in clearance: 'Where dispossessed families had been numbered in tens before, now there were hundreds. Kintail, Glenelg, Glendessary, and Loch Arkaig ... names of bitter memory plot the movements of the sheep farming frontier' [Gray (2)].

Although these removals often resulted in emigration they did not necessarily cause wholesale depopulation, until at least the second decade of the nineteenth century. Frequently the dispossessed were relocated on coastal or marginal areas while the interior glens were laid down for sheep. The best known example of this pattern was the great clearances in Sutherland where between c. 1810 and c. 1825 an estimated 8,000 to 9,000 people were moved to the coastal fringe and settled in fishing and quasi-industrial communities. This was probably the most remarkable programme of social engineering ever undertaken in nineteenth century Britain. In the short run, at least, it limited out-migration but, in the longer term, population levels on the estate began to fall rapidly.

(v) *Emigration and clearance.* Between c.1840 and c.1860 a new series of evictions began in the western Highlands and islands. They differed from most previous clearances since they were intended to achieve depopulation. Attempts at resettlement were abandoned and increasingly those displaced were encouraged to emigrate. 'Compulsory emigration', to use the contemporary phrase, became widespread. Landlords offered the bleak choice to their small tenantry of eviction or dispossession together with assisted passage to North America or Australia. During the potato famines of the period 1846-56 an estimated 16,000 received assistance to emigrate in this way from either proprietors or charitable societies.

Preconditions for clearance

A useful approach here might be to consider initially those general, conditioning factors which made widespread population displacement possible. This can then be followed by an analysis of those influences which triggered the specific types of clearance outlined earlier in the essay.

The Jacobite defeat in 1746 and the imposition of effective rule by the state officially brought to an end the old clan-based martial society of the Highlands. Land could now more easily be regarded as a unit of resource than the basis of military power. This created the essential precondition for rationalisation of traditional agriculture. Landlords more than ever before came to value their estates

principally as economic assets. It is important, however, not to exaggerate the significance of the aftermath of the '45 rebellion. Rather than a great watershed it can more reasonably be seen in the light of recent research as the final phase in the steady encroachment of state power in the Highlands, a process which can be traced back at least to the reign of James VI and I in the early seventeenth century. It is now clear also that southern civilisation and economic pressure were already influencing the *mentalité* of Highland proprietors, the markets for Highland products, such as cattle, fish and timber, and even tenurial structures in some districts long before 1745

[Hunter (3)]. Finally, there was no automatic link between pacification and clearance. Major structural change did not begin in the Highlands for about two decades or more after Culloden, indicative of the fact that the massive expansion in the markets for northern commodities in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was much more decisive in initiating innovation than political change.

Landlord authority was a vital precondition of the Clearances. If, as is often asserted, Scottish landowners were among the most powerful in Europe, the Highland élite was the most absolute of all. They had enormous capacity to displace population and radically alter settlement structure. The peasantry possessed land but did not own it; there were therefore few of the obstacles which restrained seigneurial power in many European societies. The vast majority of the small tenantry had no leases and held land on an annual basis. Below this rent-paying group, and forming as much as one third to one half of the population of some estates in the nineteenth century, was an undermass of semi-landless sub-tenants who paid no rent directly to the proprietor. Most inhabitants on a typical Highland property were therefore liable to eviction at the landlord's will. There were none of the complicated legal procedures associated with the enclosure of lands in England. Landowners merely had to obtain a Summons or Writ of Removal from the local Sheriff Court.

These tenurial weaknesses reflected the absence of bargaining power on the part of the small tenantry. With the expansion of capital-intensive commercial pastoralism, they rapidly ceased to have much economic value. The balance of power swung even more emphatically towards the proprietor in the subsistence crises of 1816-17, 1837-38 and, most importantly, the great potato famine of 1846-56. Many came to depend at these times on the largesse of landlords for life itself. With few legal, tenurial or economic restraints on the autocracy of the social élite, the relationship between proprietor and the small tenantry could easily become an exploitative one. Only sustained and stubborn resistance in the fashion of the Irish peasantry might have inhibited the full implementation of landlord strategies but, although modern research shows that the Clearances were far from peaceful, effective and enduring protest before 1860 was relatively rare [Richards (1)]. The problem was, however, that even in times of severe destitution the crofters and cottars only grudgingly surrendered their land; contemporary observers also pointed out that the poorest class in the Highlands was also the least mobile. As the great French historian, Pierre Goubert, has said: 'No peasant willingly gives up land, be it only half a furrow'. Out of the

inevitable conflict between landlord omnipotence and these unyielding peasant values came the agony of the Clearances.

Causes of clearance

Within this general context it is possible to identify three specific influences which contributed directly to population displacement at different times between 1760 and 1860.

(i) *The landlord role.* Pressure on the landlord class to exploit their estates more effectively intensified in the later

eighteenth century due to the impact of 'improving' ideology, the growing hostility to communal practices and structures, the new faith in individualism and the increasing costs of maintaining social position in an age of rising inflation and competitive display. The Highland aristocracy had fewer choices, and alternatives than their peers elsewhere in Britain due to the poverty of the resource base in the north, the virtual absence of coal reserves, the weakness of the urban sector and the very great suitability of

the area for large-scale commercial pastoralism.

(ii) *The expansion of markets.* Growing landlord needs

for more income coincided with a huge expansion in demand from the urban and industrialising areas of Britain for all Highland produce. The markets for cattle, sheep, whisky, fish, timber, slate and kelp were all buoyant. Increases in production of some of these commodities, notably cattle, could often be accommodated within the existing social and settlement structure. But sheep and kelp were less easily absorbed. Kelp manufacture was the highly labour-intensive production of alkali from seaweed which was used in the soap and glass industries. By 1815 it was reckoned to employ between 25,000 to 30,000 in the western Highlands and islands. Landlords broke up the existing joint tenancies to create subsistence plots for both the kelp labour force and for fishermen [Hunter (3)]. Large-scale sheep farming caused even greater displacement. The local population was mainly excluded; the new breeds were Cheviots and Lintons from the south and sheep ranching quickly became a business of great efficiency absorbing large amounts of capital in which traditional society was very deficient. As the sheep frontier expanded, communities were uprooted and resettled in less favoured areas.

(iii) *Economic and demographic strain.* From the 1820s serious economic recession undermined many of the peasant bi-employments of the period before 1815. Fishing stagnated, cattle prices fell and above all kelp manufacture collapsed with the rise of the modern chemical industry and the removal of excise duty on salt. At the same time the population of the western Highlands and islands continued to increase at a rate per annum which accelerated from 0.72 (1801-10) to 1.46 (1811-20) before falling to 0.51 (1821-30). The signs of escalating demographic strain were clearly revealed in the subsistence crises of 1816-17, 1837-38 and 1846-56. This was the background to a new wave of clearances through which landlords sought to remove the 'redundant' population because they feared the huge burden of relief costs in maintaining the people and increasingly

illustrated London News, 15 January 1853



saw no viable economic alternative to large-scale sheep husbandry. In a sense, this recognition simply reflected the imperatives of developing regional specialisation within the British economy and the tendency of many areas to move towards exploitation of comparative advantage.

The social response

The Highland Clearance were associated with protest, trauma and bitterness when they occurred and bequeathed to posterity a popular tradition of lost rights. Much recent work has focussed on the reasons why agrarian reorganisation in the Highlands caused a deeper sense of alienation than anywhere else in Britain.

One likely explanation is that many of the evictions in the Highlands had more serious social costs than consolidation of land in other areas. The drive towards the expansion of commercial pastoralism created particularly large farms which were both capital and land-intensive but had little need for many hands. The new agrarian sector excluded the local population while at the same time it monopolised much of the scarce arable lands and absorbed the pastures of the old peasant cattle economy. While the mixed husbandry of the southern and eastern Highlands, and in the Scottish Low lands, released employment opportunity, sheep farming, in particular, almost invariably led to the contraction of peasant resources and income.

The problem of absorbing the cleared populations was rendered even more acute by the fact that no permanent alternative to agriculture emerged in the region. Despite the efforts of several proprietors, southern business interests and even government, the infant industrial growths of the later eighteenth century withered in the recession after the Napoleonic Wars under the impact of intense competition from lowland manufacturing centres. No dynamic urban or industrial sector developed, as in central Scotland, to absorb the dispossessed. Their sufferings were rendered even more traumatic by the fact that evictions tended increasingly to concentrate in years of subsistence crisis. At these times, hunger, disease and loss of land combined to cause terrible social destitution throughout the western mainland and islands [Hunter (3)].

There was also something distinctive about the nature of many clearances in the Highlands. They occurred within a predominantly peasant society in which, until the 1840s and beyond, land remained the primary source of food, fuel, drink, clothing and shelter. There was a widespread belief in the 'right to land', a claim which had no legal foundation but which may have rested on the ancient clan tradition of dispensing land in return for service. Ironically the old martial ethos survived in a new form long after the Jacobite defeat at Culloden because of the landlord custom of raising regiments from the men of their estates for the British army through the simple expedient of promising land in return for service. Not surprisingly after 1800, the assumption persisted on several properties that the right to the secure possession of land had been acquired in return for service not in the distant past but in the very recent present. Partly because of this the land issue stirred deeper passions in Gaeldom than anywhere else in Britain.

Yet, it was precisely in this society that eviction took place very rapidly on an especially enormous scale. This was

partly because the new sheep and cattle ranches demanded huge areas of land and partly because removal could be accomplished relatively easily with minimal legal fuss. But it was also related to the phasing of agrarian change, especially along the west coast and the islands. Two coherent processes can be identified. The first, roughly covering the period c. 1760 to 1820, involved the concentration of a larger population than before along the coasts. The second, from about the 1820s to the 1850s moved to the opposite extreme, to the consolidation of land and the dispersal of many communities. Draconian methods were widely employed in this phase to expel dense communities of smallholders. It was from this period and these districts that much of the sense of bitterness associated with the Clearances derives. These evictions also stirred emotions outside the Highlands because they were still taking place as late as the 1850s and were widely publicised. Thus this evoked the sympathies of an age with a more sensitive social conscience, a growing hostility to the excesses of landlord authority and a developing 'romantic' interest in Highland society. It was partly this growth in public sympathy which enabled Gladstone's government in 1886 to pass the Crofters' Holding Act, which considerably checked the powers of landlordism and provided for the crofting population the right to secure possession of land for which they had so long craved.

Conclusions

This topic is still at a relatively immature stage of historical investigation. There is a major need for both detailed empirical research and conceptual development in the methodology of analysis. A series of professional local studies of the type common in France would be most useful. No economic history of sheep-farming exists. Detailed studies of individual estates and of key phases in the processes of eviction would be very welcome. A systematic evaluation of the linkages between eviction, migration and emigration is a major requirement. However, it is already reasonably clear that the Clearances varied significantly over time and place, had complex origins and were not simply the result of the imposition of overweening landlord authority on a dependent peasantry. It is also firmly established that population displacement in the Highlands was mainly a consequence rather than a cause of the poverty and social distress of the region. At worst, the Clearances aggravated conditions of destitution which existed before they took place and which were then exacerbated by the combined influence of limited natural endowment, regional specialisation, rising population and weak economic diversification

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