

CLEARANCE AND THE HAYS

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In 2014, clansmen from all over the world foregathered in Stirling to recall the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, and what a memorable occasion it was. In the same year, we remembered an anniversary that likely means much more to 21st century Scots: the centenary of the outbreak of World War One. But the epic commemorations of these landmark events obscured sight of another anniversary that remains close to Scottish hearts, for 2014 was the bi-centenary of *Bliadhna an Losgaidh*: The Year of the Burnings.

The Highland Clearances remains among the most emotive and least understood episodes in Scotland's history. It is ironic that the family most vilified for the Clearances – that of the Duke of Sutherland – were the very landlords who invested most heavily in their estate's future, who did more than any other to find alternative employment for their people and to build a sustainable industrial base on their lands, however misguided their efforts. The Sutherland family's unenviable reputation derives largely from the Strathnaver evictions of 1814. Although these events seem destined to live forever in infamy, only 27 houses were burned. Only two deaths can be attributed to the evictions, and those indirectly.

Bad enough, you may say, but scarcely the widespread eviction, mass murder, and forced emigration of popular myth. Sutherland's Factor, Patrick Sellar, had given the Strathnaver tenants six months' notice to quit – hardly unreasonable – but the folk just didn't move. Nevertheless, Sellar's handling of the situation was heavy-handed. He stood trial for Culpable Homicide – similar to the English offence of Manslaughter - over the two deaths. Of the Duke and Duchess themselves, perhaps the worst that can be said is that they knew no more of their vast Highland domain than could be seen from the windows of Dunrobin Castle, although some of the greatest evils in history have resulted from well-intentioned ignorance.

In Lowland and North East Scotland, where most Hays are to be found, just as many people were cleared from the land, emigration was just as prevalent, as in the Highlands. Why, then, is there no folk-memory of these events in the rural Lowlands, none of the enduring resentment that festers to this day in Highland Scotland and among the descendants of Highlanders cleared from their homes?

Agricultural improvement was well underway before the end of the 17th century and Lowland Scotland was destined to set a global standard of excellence in agriculture. Under the old system, almost everybody – landowner, tenant and sub-tenant – had a stake in the land, albeit a very unequal one. The new system involved the consolidation of the old joint tenancies into large farms and the sweeping away of the sub-tenant class. This certainly involved hardship; the majority had to make what they initially perceived as the humiliating transformation from landholder to wage labourer as the new, large tenancies fell into the hands of the richest, the cleverest, the strongest or the hardest working. However, there were a number of forces at work which alleviated these changes.

The old sub-tenants – or cottars - took intense pride in their status as independent landholders working in their own account; they were "better" than servants. However, the reality of the cottar's life is that he lived a barely subsistence existence on a miserable scrap of land, in a house little better than a hovel. For the most part, the swallowing of his pride was mitigated by a significant rise in his standard of living as a wage labourer. Secondly, the Lowland country dweller cleared from the land

in the years after, say, 1750 had an alternative to farm work. The Industrial Revolution would soon be in full pelt and those who had to leave the land as a result of economic change had ready access to other, often more remunerative, employment in the new industries of the emerging towns. Thirdly, agricultural improvement in the rural Lowlands was not a uniform process; it was a gradual evolution that took well over a century, taking effect at different times in different places, with none of the sudden and shocking changes the Highlands were to experience.

Finally, the role of the Lowland landowner contrasted sharply with that of his Highland counterpart. The English demographer Thomas Malthus famously observed in 1810 that Scotland's agricultural improvement was entirely down to enterprising, industrious tenant farmers, with no credit due to the sclerotic and dissolute landowning class. There is some merit in this view, but at least the landowner did not actually stand in the way of improvement and was often very supportive of it. Landowners took pride in their estates, where they had their principal residences, wanted to be part of the new crusade for improvement and – most important of all – took great care over the quality of tenant to whom they entrusted their property.

This was the experience of most Hays who relocated from the land to the cities or overseas. In the main, they moved for opportunity and if there were regrets at leaving the land of their fathers, they were tempered by hopes of a bright future. The experience of Highland Scotland was very different.

The popular view of the Highland Clearances is that everything hinges on the last Jacobite Rebellion of 1745/46. After this, the Abolition of Heritable Jurisdictions – an Act of Parliament of 1747 – deprived the chiefs of their power, whereupon they lost interest in their clansmen and departed for London where they busied themselves, in the words of historian James Hunter, “turning themselves into the effete Englishmen they have remained ever since.” From there, they cleared their people from their homes, motivated by greed for the ready cash they needed to finance their expensive, southern lifestyles.

There is, of course, some truth in that analysis, but there are difficulties with this view of 1745 as a kind of watershed after which nothing-was-ever-the-same-again. On the one hand, Clearance was overwhelmingly a feature of the 19th century, not the 18th. On the other, by 1745, the power of the lairds and chiefs had been in retreat for nearly 200 years, and the Feudal Barony – the legal entity from which they formally drew their power – was already a busted flush: after 1560, the landowners had a rival for power in the shape of the reformed church and by 1745 the parish, not the landed estate, was firmly established as the principal agent of local administration and justice.

In 1963, a Canadian journalist called John Prebble wrote a book entitled *The Highland Clearances*. It is a measure of the strength of feeling these events inspire that it is still, nearly 60 years on, the biggest selling book on Scottish history ever produced. It was described at the time by the Historiographer Royal, Professor Gordon Donaldson, as “utter rubbish.” His 21st century successor, Sir Tom Devine, is a little kinder, conceding that it is a rattling good read, fluently written and cogently argued, although, says Sir Tom, that is largely because the author makes no effort to address any of the profound complexities of Clearance.

It is Prebble's view of Clearance that has prevailed in the popular imagination. His principal source – Donald Macleod, a stonemason from Sutherland – was a naturally gifted writer and a keen observer with a journalist's eye for events. Macleod paints a compelling picture of Highland society before

the Clearances, depicting a "Brigadoon" land of milk and honey, which was a very long way removed from the realities of Highland life. A myriad of social and economic issues combined to make the life of the ordinary Highlander challenging at best, including, *inter alia*, overcrowding and ongoing subdivision of landholdings, generation by generation.

The arrival of the potato in the middle of the 18th century played a large part in supporting a growing population for whom there was not, by any objective measure, sufficient economic activity to sustain. Potatoes are highly nutritious and easy to grow, producing large quantities even on a small area of poor land, which facilitated the ongoing subdivision of tenancies. In many parts of the Highlands, and in particular in the Western Isles, this would have a devastating effect during the potato blight of the 1840s.

Whereas Lowland Scotland gradually evolved with the times, taking agricultural improvement and the Industrial Revolution in its stride, 18th century Highland society was largely the same as it had been 500 years earlier. Inevitably it had to come into the modern age and a series of economic developments eventually forced seismic social change, from whose effects the Highlands have yet to recover. Clearance was only one manifestation of this and seen from this perspective, the Highland Clearances were an economic inevitability born of necessity, rather than acts of deliberate callousness by self-serving landowners.

The end of the Peninsular War in 1815 saw a collapse in the beef market as the huge continental army was demobilised. The remaining market for beef was best served by producers close to the big centres of population and therefore it was the Highland pastoral farmers who felt the worst of its effects. About the same time, for reasons that have never been entirely explained, the herring shoals on which the Highland fishing industry depended moved from the sea lochs of the west into the much deeper and colder waters of the Atlantic, where they were accessible only to big trawlers from Aberdeen and the east coast ports.

Many of the island and mainland coastal communities had historically depended on the kelp industry, the burning of seaweed to produce the soda ash which was a key element in the production of glass, soap and textiles. Entire estates depended on kelp exports for their revenues. Kelp was highly labour intensive and landlords went to great lengths to keep people on their lands in order to harvest it. After 1815, however, it became possible to import a cheaper alternative from Spain. Within a few years, it had been replaced altogether by a chemical product and by 1828, kelp, which had been worth £30 per ton at the turn of the century, was selling for less than one tenth of that price and wasn't worth gathering.

So in the 10 years after 1815, three of the four cornerstones of the Highland economy – beef, fish and kelp – had evaporated. That left only wool, which grew best on the back of the Great Cheviot sheep, the animal that would become the Highlanders' nemesis. Small scale farming could not co-exist with the great sheep ranches that had to be developed to make ends meet, and so the people had to go.

This is the modern historian's view of the Highland Clearances, as promulgated by such luminaries as Malcolm Gray, Roy Campbell and Tom Devine. Reflecting the view that history is driven by events, not men, they absolve the landlords by demonstrating that Clearance was the inevitable

consequence of economic and social circumstances. However, the fact that John Prebble's sentimental interpretation is wrong, does not mean that the landlords were therefore right.

By the end of the 18th century, the role of the landlord in the Highlands was, at best, peripheral. The lairds had long since decamped to Edinburgh and London and, with the merest handful of exceptions, they saw their estates as no more than a source of unearned income – income which they drew with a sense of entitlement that beggars belief. Writing at the turn of the 19th century, Lord Seaforth, one of the biggest landowners in the Isles, summed up their attitude: "What Hebridean proprietor," asked the Chief of the Mackenzies, "resides on his lands who can live elsewhere?" The answer is that they did not. By 1820, not a single landowner in the Islands lived on his estate. Across the Highlands as a whole, fewer than one third of proprietors spent even part of the year on their lands.

By 1800, all meaningful connection between the Chiefs and their ancient patrimony had been severed. During the Ross Riots against the influx of sheep in 1792, Sir Hugh Munro of Foulis wrote to the Lord Advocate, Robert Dundas: "We are at present so completely under the heel of the populace that should they come to burn our homes or destroy our property, we are incapable of resistance." It is impossible to conceive of a Highland Chief of any previous generation cowering before his own people in this craven fashion.

The disconnect between the landlord and his estate had a direct bearing on the way the land was managed. Unlike the Lowland lairds, who for the most part invested in their property to improve it for the future, those in the Highlands simply drained its resources for their own conspicuous consumption. One of the worst offenders was Ranald Macdonald, 20th of Clanranald. In the early years of the 19th century, Clanranald was drawing a vast income of over £18000 per annum from the kelp trade alone. He spent it all living the lascivious life of a Regency buck in London and Brighton, oblivious to the urgent need for investment in his property. The present Macdonald of Clanranald is a London restaurateur. Without a trace of irony, he has named his establishment *Boisdale*, after the lands his forebears plundered shamelessly to establish their credentials as English gentlemen.

The ultimate consequence of this constant drive for immediate ready cash was that, across the Highlands, the people were pushed further to the periphery to make way for the sheep that maximised the landlord's income. The more conscientious landlords - including that greatest of all bogey-men, the Duke of Sutherland – made genuine efforts to establish centres of industry on the coast to provide employment for those displaced. Once again, however, that basic ignorance of Highland society, shared by landowners and their agents alike, reduced their plans to dust. On the Sutherland estate, people cleared from the glens were moved to the coast where the Duke envisaged the growth of new, urban industrial towns. The people were given crofts on the shore where they were kept deliberately short of land to encourage them to develop alternative sources of income, which the estate believed would be initially based on weaving and fishing. It was completely lost on the Duke and his Factor that the people possessed neither the skills nor the capital to take the project forward. Increasingly, emigration became the only option for the dispossessed.

None of this fully explains the resentment over the Clearances that lingers to this day; all industrialising societies experience some degree of displacement from the countryside, now accepted as an inevitable step in the relentless march of progress. There are two factors - damning

indictments of the landlords, the government and the judiciary - which are unique to Highland Scotland, and that justify this enduring bitterness.

After the 1745 Rebellion, the government's immediate priority was the "pacification" of the Highlands – the suppression of what remained of the Clan System and its military structure - to ensure it could never again threaten the state. Part of that plan was to harness the martial ardour of the Highlanders by recruiting them into the British Army, via a series of Highland regiments which were to be raised by the landowners. A common approach to recruitment was to offer "land for service": a tenancy would be granted in return for a certain number of years' service by the sons of the family. When the demand for sheep farms, and therefore Clearance, became intense, Highland landlords – and there is not a single Highland estate I know of that can be exonerated from this charge – found no difficulty in breaking this legally binding contract, the moment it suited their purpose. It is no exaggeration to say that some of these tenants had paid for their land with their children's lives. The betrayal of that sacred trust has been neither forgotten, nor forgiven.

Hand in glove with the pacification policy went a process that was nothing short of the ethnic cleansing of Gaelic Scotland. Clearance was actively used to facilitate this process, in which government, landlords and the judicial authorities actively colluded. When Clearance was at its height, the Duke of Sutherland's agent, James Loch, wrote enthusiastically that, "in a few years the character of the whole of this population will be completely changed. The children of those removed from the hills will lose all recollection of the habits and customs of their fathers." The inherent injustice of this policy was recognised at the time, although not in the United Kingdom: Swiss economist Jean Charles de Sismondi wrote: "There is something repellent and absurd about interpreting as progress the destruction of the happiness, the liberty and the very existence of a race in the name of wealth." In the century after the arrival of the first Cheviot sheep, the church and the education system would also be engaged to destroy all that was distinctive about Highland Scotland. It was a process that a resurgent Gaelic culture is only now beginning to reverse.

The sheep that replaced the people were not destined to last. By the 1870s the invention of the corrugated boiler flue, which could withstand much greater pressure of steam, had dramatically speeded up transport by sea. It was then more economical to import wool from North America and Australia, where economies of scale meant it could be produced cheaply and in vast quantities. The land that had been cultivated for centuries before being given over to sheep, was in turn given over to the abomination of the "sporting estate", allowed to run wild and revert to its virgin state. The ultimate legacy of the Clearance landlords calls to mind the words of Calgacus, as reported by the Roman historian, Tacitus: *They created a desert, and called it peace.*