CHAPTER XIII

1846

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AFFECTING ARGYLL PROPERTIES—VISITS TO THE HEBRIDES

THE lessons which came to me in this period of my life were not confined to those connected with politics. The same mysterious calamity which then broke up our political parties told most seriously on the private affairs of my father and myself. As suddenly as the British Parliament found to its dismay that it had in Ireland a population on its hands of 8,000,000 souls, a great number of whom were threatened with starvation, so, not less suddenly, did we find that we had on our hands on our own estates a population of about 7,000 in a like condition. The whole of one Hebridean island, Tiree, and a large portion of another, Mull, formed part of the Argyll estates. Geographical isolation had kept the Hebrides behind the rest of Scotland in the progress of civilization. The inhabitants were steeped in an ancient hereditary ignorance of the very elements of agricultural industry. The whole of Celtic Scotland was bad enough in this way. The people did not even know how to save a little of the abundant summer grass for hay in winter, and the cattle were consequently nearly starved. They did not know the principle of a rotation of crops, and the corn was miserably poor. Their system of occupancy was communal, each man changing his wretched patch with his neighbours in the same village or township every year, by lot. The very idea of improvement was impossible. The indi-

vidual mind, the source of all power, was kept down to the level of the stupidest, who had the right to object to any change. But, bad as the condition of things was on the mainland, it was ten times worse in the Hebrides.

All through the military ages, the epoch of the clans, the insular chiefs were in chronic hostility to the Scottish monarchy; and when not fighting against the Crown, they were perpetually cutting each other's throats, devastating each other's lands, and putting to flight each other's followers. The only chance the poorer classes had of peace and security was to come under the power of some chief who was strong enough to protect them. My family had always taken the side of the Crown in its contests to secure a central and national Government. That was the highest service any subject could then render to his Sovereign and his country. The natural and legitimate reward was grants of the lands of the rebellious and defeated chiefs. Such grants accordingly were given to the Argyll family, in the seventeenth century, of lands in Mull and Tiree and Morvern. The value set upon landed possessions under the anarchy of the clans had been measured by the number of men they could hold for the purposes of war and plunder. And that number was generally greatly in excess of the amount of people that could be supported by merely local produce. Therefore, at the union of the Crowns in 1603, the population was already in many places excessive. The same thing happened in the Border Highlands, where the clan system had been quite as much developed and as mischievous as in the Celtic Highlands. In the Border Highlands the surplus population was speedily dispersed by migration to the rising towns, and by the plantation of Ulster. But in the Celtic Highlands no such depletion followed for more than a hundred years.

Between the union of the Crowns in 1603 and the first Jacobite Rebellion in 1715, the population was only kept down by pestilence and famine. Periodically the

small-pox decimated the people, whilst seasons of scarcity, from a bad climate and from a most ignorant and barbarous husbandry, were frequent and severe. Even with these checks on population, it did increase beyond the average means of subsistence, because, unfortunately, when fighting ceased, the fighting organization of society remained. The cultivators, if such they could be called, were grouped in 'townships.' They had no individual holdings, so that even the few who might know how to improve land had no inducement or opportunity to do so. They were only tenants at will under the larger leaseholders, and they were liable to them for services in labour which were indefinite, and therefore tended to be oppressive and discouraging to individual industry.

The island of Tiree had the natural advantages of good soil and rich pasture. Yet when the attention of my ancestors was first called to the state of the people, it was found to be in a condition which we should now describe as barbarous. There was no remedy short of a complete break with the past, and a reconstitution of society. The poorer classes had to be emancipated from their thraldom to the leaseholders, and from their worse thraldom to each other. But all such changes, however beneficent, were opposed by ignorance and the insuperable love of ancient customs. Reform was effected only by the power of the landlord to insist on the necessary changes, or on the departure from the estate of those who refused. But fast as these reforms led to increase of produce, so fast did the population increase.

Then came what seemed a godsend at the time—the discovery that the seaweed cast on an open and stormy shore was full of alkali salts of great commercial value, which could be realized by a very simple process of burning in open kilns. A roaring trade was soon established. My grandfather paid to the people so high a price for their 'kelp' that practically they had no

rent to pay for the land. He was an old soldier, and had been busy in his youth raising regiments for the army. He disliked and dreaded the emigration which had begun to set in, and to accommodate more people, he cut up several of the larger farms into smaller possessions, holding about ten or a dozen cows. Unfortunately, he died in 1806, and was followed by my uncle, Duke George, who was what silly people call an excellent landlord, because he let the people do exactly as they liked. And what they did like to do was to allow all their descendants to settle on the land, subdividing again and again their holdings to accommodate their young married sons. The potato had been introduced earlier, and had served well to support the growing multitudes. The population of Tiree had increased more rapidly than the population of Glasgow, so that from 1769 to 1802 it had increased from 1,670 to 2,776, and in 1846 it had mounted up to 5,000.

When the potatoes failed in 1846, of course there was great distress, and there would have been starvation but for the measures taken by my father and myself. His health had by this time so far declined that I was called upon to deal with the difficulty as well as I could. What we did was to take advantage of the loans which Sir Robert Peel established to enable land-owners to tide over the difficulties that might arise from the abolition of the Corn Laws. In the meantime we bought cargoes of Indian meal, and gave it out to the people in wages for systematic drainage on the land. But we did also what was even more immediately necessary for a permanent reform. The time had not then come which I call the epoch of the fools, when agitators told the people that an excessive population ought to be 'rooted in the soil,' and that emigration was a device of the great enemy of mankind. The people themselves were intelligent enough to see that their numbers were excessive, if the mainstay of their former food was no longer to be depended

on. They therefore petitioned my father to help them to emigrate to Canada. I advised him to comply. Large sums were spent on emigration for several years, and before the operation had been completed we had helped to settle in the New World, under favourable conditions, very nearly 2,000 souls from the overburdened island of Tiree. In the meantime drainage of land went on upon a large scale. Vacated holdings were added to the other crofts, and in the course of a few years the people were beyond the reach of famine from the potato failure. They have remained so ever since. But it was a time of great anxiety, great trouble, and no small embarrassment. The whole rental of the estates affected was absorbed for more than five years, whilst a sum of £10,000 was borrowed from Peel's Parliamentary Loan Fund, at the rate of 6½ per cent., which involved a heavy charge, so long as increased production was inadequate to meet it. By the judicious management, however, of those whom we employed, this great result and test of real improvement—remunerative returns—was ultimately brought about, and I had the satisfaction of seeing the loan entirely paid off at the end of the statutory period—thirty years.

At the close of the London season of 1846, I was anxious to visit the estates in Mull to see the people and the works which were then designed, or begun, for averting famine and for improving the farms and crofts. My brother-in-law, Lord Blantyre, was an excellent agriculturist, and I was anxious to have such advice as he could give. We therefore proposed to him and to Lady Blantyre that they should come with us to Mull and see the beauties of the country. They entered into the plan with pleasure, and we were soon ensconced in the farm-house of Knock, close to the lake and woods where I had shot my first deer, and had spent such a happy day in 1842. The tenant of the sheep-farm of Knock, Mr. Campbell Paterson, was an ideal tenant. He had been a banker

at Oban, and was expending money on stone dikes to enclose the comparatively small area of level land which stretched from the foot of the mountains to the sea.

We had some excellent fishing in the loch and river, and I shot my first seal at the head of Loch na Keal, close to the farm-house. But the moment it was shot it sank, and the question was how to get it. The water was not deep, but it was full of seaweed. Our host, however, was equal to the occasion. He marked the spot, and then, returning home, he took down an iron curtain-rod, and tied to it a number of fish-hooks. To each end of the rod he attached a rope. This apparatus was let down near the spot, and hauled slowly over it. On raising it we saw the seal shining through the water, and it was brought easily into the boat. The wonderful structure of this creature filled me with interest and admiration. Mr. Paterson impressed upon me the immense number of salmon and sea-trout which even a few such creatures must consume. This was undeniable. But my fondness for wild animals of all kinds would not allow me to admit the conclusion to which he pointed, that the whole of the seals should be destroyed. I liked to see their strange movements when basking on the rocks or when following a boat in the sea.

But the lofty sheep-grazings of Ben More and the inland shores of Loch na Keal were not what we had come to see. Our principal destination was a part of Mull called the Ross (or Point), stretching westward, close to Iona. There was no direct route to this particular point, except by an open boat. To row across would have occupied many hours, and taken us into very open waters. Our host, however, again came to the rescue. He had a sailing lugger in the bay, which brought to him from time to time all sorts of supplies from the low country. It was a large powerful boat, but entirely without any accommodation for civilized passengers. He offered it to

us, and, being in the mood for some roughing and adventure, we accepted the offer. Sailing down Loch na Keal, we had the grand ranges of Ben More overhead against the southern sky, whilst down the vista to the west we came in sight, one after the other, of

> 'All the group of islets gay
> That guard famed Staffa round.'

The day was perfect, and as we emerged from the walls of Loch na Keal we found ourselves within a couple of miles of Staffa. The sea was calm. It was an irresistible temptation to turn a little out of our course, and to visit the famous island and its marvellous cave. I had seen it, but never tire of seeing it. My wife and her sister had never been there. So we put the lugger's helm about, and steered for Staffa. It was most enjoyable to have it all to ourselves, instead of sharing it with a crowd of passengers. The day was so calm that we landed easily, and walked upon the causeway of broken columns right into the cave. There is nothing in the world like it. There are thousands of sea-precipices a great deal higher. There are whole miles of basaltic columns in Antrim and elsewhere higher and more continuous. But nowhere in the world, so far as we know, is there anything approaching to the majesty of the great sea-cave at Staffa. The perfection of the columnar structure, the high relief in which the columns stand out from each other, the symmetry of the sides, the perfection of the central arching, the wide opening to the ocean swell, the depth inwards to which that swell reaches between the retreating columnar walls, the reverberations of the sea, the pellucid clearness of the water, and the lovely colouring reflected through it from seaweeds and from encrusting corallines, make it altogether a scene absolutely unique, and, on a fine day, gloriously beautiful beyond description.

The noble lines of descriptive poetry in which

Sir Walter Scott has dealt with Staffa in 'The Lord of the Isles' have with true genius struck the fundamental note on which its peculiar impressiveness undoubtedly depends. It challenges no comparison with any mere sea-cliff or any mere accidental cavern. It does not even suggest the power of any of the forces of Nature working at random, as they seem to work in either the beauty or the awfulness of mountain forms. It strikes the imagination at once as a specially wrought wonder, but not by human power—as veritably a building, but not made with hands:

> 'When, as to shame the temples decked,
> By skill of earthly architect,
> Nature herself would seem to raise
> A minster to her Maker's praise.'

It does, therefore, seem a marvellous fact that no knowledge of the wonders of Staffa had ever reached the world till it had been visited and described by a scientific Englishman, Sir Stamford Raffles. It must have been often seen by the natives and the Norsemen in their passing boats and galleys. It was certainly seen by the monks of Iona, because joints of the columns form part of the material used in the ancient ecclesiastical buildings of the island. It was a most convenient quarry, only six miles off, and water carriage all the way. The truth seems to be that the human eye in those ages was dead to all the wonders of the physical world.

After a delightful hour upon the island, we regained our lugger, and turned her head to our destination—the village of Bunessan, at the head of a short arm of the sea called Loch Laigh. It was not more than five miles off, but, unfortunately, the wind was very light and directly in our teeth, so that we had to make long tacks, or, as the skipper called them, 'fine streetches,' in order to make good our way. It was late before we reached Bunessan, and found a little inn with very poor accommodation and no kitchen

except a thatched hovel outside the walls. But we were all young, and some 'roughing it' was part of our fun.

The Ross, though interesting and curious geologically and otherwise, and although it has some lovely bays upon its shores, is not itself picturesque, consisting largely as it does of low hummocky hills of a fine red granite. But the views from it are various and beautiful. Every evening we saw the sun gilding the columns of Staffa, whilst a magnificent headland of volcanic terraces, piled up to the height of 1,600 feet, looked down into our tranquil harbour from the east. From a very short distance above our house, the eye ranged on the southern side over wavy distances of sea to the hills of Colonsay and the triple peaks of Jura. We visited with the Blantyres the great granite quarry, out of which Mr. Alan Stevenson had built the Skerryvore Lighthouse, and were struck with its absolute silence and desertion, in contrast with the busy and laborious years during which its beautiful and faultless blocks had been first blasted and hammered to a convenient size, and then embarked on lighters in a now empty creek.

After the Blantyres had seen enough of the curious scenery and as curious cooking, they took the steamer for Iona and went home, whilst my wife and I remained behind, in order that I might make myself more perfectly acquainted with the people and the individual farms. Works of agricultural improvement, begun for the relief of famine, were then going on upon a large scale. Bogs were being drained and fenced, and holdings were being reconsolidated. In all these operations I was intensely interested. I well recollect how, the next year, when an old friend of my father came to visit us, he found me busy draining a refractory field of clay close to the castle at Inveraray. He had known me and my pursuits from my childhood, for he had given me some fine specimens for my collection of birds, and he said,

'I didn't know you cared for this sort of thing.' He was quite right. In my boyhood at Ardencaple I had never either seen or heard of land improvement. My father had other pursuits, and the little land he possessed that was capable of reclamation he was content to leave covered with the golden furze. There can be no doubt whence this taste came to me: it was from my old grandfather, who had died seventeen years before I was born, but who had been one of the greatest land-improvers of his time. It now became to me a genuine delight to see land redeemed from slovenly and ignorant cultivation, and brought under the power of intelligence and capital.

It was a rare pleasure to help those men who were capable of turning improved land to good account. It was an expensive pleasure, as it absorbed for several years the whole revenue of the estate, out of which I could never afford during these years to devote a shilling to any mere personal expenditure. On the other hand, it held out a prospect of a fair ultimate return, because of the enormous difference between the produce under the old managment and the produce under the new. No man can increase his income honestly, except by conferring some great benefit upon others. But there is no profession or calling of which this is more conspicuously true than of land-owning and farming, since whatever increase of income they can secure can come from nothing but a direct corresponding increase in the supply of human food. As this would be a tedious and impossible subject to resume from year to year, I may here state at once that I have continued to be an improver of land on a large scale during my whole life, the total sum expended by me during fifty years having exceeded half a million pounds sterling. Moreover, it has been paid entirely out of income, not a shilling having been raised by loan, except that borrowed to meet the famine, under Sir Robert Peel's Act, which has long been repaid.

As it was with my old friend in my youth, who had

only known me in connection with very different pursuits, so has it been with the public in my later years. I have been known, more or less, in connection with politics and with literature and with science, but nobody has ever noticed or known my work as a land-improver. And this I say, not as a complaint, but to point out that the same oblivion enwraps the whole work of the land-owning class, as compared with the work of the manufacturing and commercial classes. Their works strike the eye and the imagination. The growth of cities, the growth of fleets, the creation of great factories, of tall chimneys—all those and many other evidences are always in sight. But the drainage of land is never seen at all, and even farmhouses and enclosures escape attention. The landlord invests his thousands mainly underground, and the passing idiot thinks that his rental is some kind of spontaneous return for which the owner has done nothing.