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Eighteenth Century Highland Landlords and the Poverty Problem

DURING the latter part of the eighteenth century the inhabitants of many parts of the Highlands and Hebrides were living permanently in a state that bordered upon destitution. They were badly housed, they were poorly fed, and they had a continual struggle to pay their rents.¹

This state of poverty was not universal; in some areas and on some estates the tenants presented an appearance of comparative prosperity. Where it did exist it had certain limits, for its existence did not prevent a large increase in the population of the Highlands, and that increase was greatest where the poverty was most marked; apparently the food supply was not so short as to affect the birth rate. But, after making these reservations, the fact remains that in the districts in question the general standard of living was below what was regarded, even in the eighteenth century, as a decent level for subsistence. Highland farmers often enjoyed fewer of the comforts of life than the ordinary day labourers in the Lowlands, and the latter were not a class that could be accused of riotous living.

What was the cause of the low Highland standard?

No doubt, it was partly due to custom. There is no evidence that the standard of living amongst the Highland peasantry had ever been anything but low. Ministers of long residence in the

¹ See the *Old Statistical Account* and the *General Views of Agriculture* for the Highland Counties, 1794-18.

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Highlands, even when critical of the conditions that prevailed about 1795, made no attempt to represent the past as a golden age. When they made definite comparisons as a result of their own experience, these were almost invariably in favour of the present.¹ They appear to have had no illusions about the old order.

The second factor in the situation was the rapid increase of population. The figures given in the *Old Statistical Account*² are significant, and the increase continued to be equally remarkable for the twenty years following 1795. It is unnecessary to enlarge upon the subject since it has been already dealt with fully in a former article upon emigration.³ The increase was undoubted, and the only question that arose was how could the districts affected absorb these additions to their population? With their geographical conditions, and with their want of manufacturing towns, it seemed likely, that if things were simply left to take their natural course, the standard of living, low in 1755, would be still lower in 1795.

The conditions of the eighteenth century Highland poverty problem presented themselves thus.

Given a low standard of living to start with, given a rapid increase of population, given an area with no automatic method of providing employment for its increase, how was the standard of living to be raised, how, indeed, was it to be kept from falling? Obviously no merely negative policy on the part of the landowners would solve the problem. The proprietor who clung fondly to the methods of an allegedly paternal past did not avoid the distressing sight of poverty at his own gates. Highland unemployment and Highland distress could not be wiped out merely by rekindling the ashes of a dying feudalism. A positive policy was wanted.

As stated, the problem appears to have been mainly one of creating employment. That was true so far, and would have

¹ O.S.A. Fortingal (Perthshire), Lochgoilhead (Argyll), etc.

² Typical Parishes.	Pop. 1755	Pop. c. 1795
Applecross (Ross)	835	1734
Glenshiel (Ross)	509	721
Edderachylis (Sutherland)	869	1024
Rogart (Sutherland)	1761	2000
Abernyte (Perth)	258	345
Kilcamonnell	1925	2448
Kilberry (Argyll)		
Hebridean parishes	49,485	75,466

³ *Scottish Historical Review*, vol. xvii. p. 73.

been still truer but for the psychology of the Highlander. The latter had strong prejudices against certain kinds of work, notably day-labouring, and would often prefer to live in a state of semi-starvation rather than accept such employment in his own parish, though he was quite willing to do so in the Lowlands; very much as a middle class Englishman before 1914 would often do in Canada what he would have scorned to have been seen doing in England. This particular form of Highland pride was in process of decline, but it was still strong enough about 1800 to complicate the problem of finding work for all the Highland inhabitants in their own area.

For the moment, we propose to leave this consideration out of account. We are mainly concerned here with the steps which the landlords took, or might have taken, to raise the standard of living, and amongst the latter we do not include the working of psychological miracles upon their tenantry.

On the much discussed question of bettering Highland conditions, contemporary opinion was divided into several different groups. According to one of these groups, the only adequate policy was a lavish expenditure on public works, and the encouragement of local manufactures. The manufactures were to occupy the bulk of the inhabitants, and the owners would then be left free to run their estates upon the best Lowland models, no longer hampered, as they had been in the past by the necessity of using uneconomic methods for the sake of providing work for the surplus population. This was the view put forward by many persons intimately acquainted with Highland conditions, such as Sir John Sinclair, James Anderson the agricultural writer, and others. Sinclair, indeed, thought that nothing else offered any real hope for the future, not even the development of the fisheries upon which Knox built great expectations. The essential thing to keep in mind about the group is, that however the individuals in it differed in their details, they were all agreed that the solution of the Highland problem could only be found in the creation of employments other than agrarian, and *not* in changes in farming methods or estate management, though they thought that such changes were desirable. We do not propose in this article to enter into the detailed projects of this group, since these do not directly affect the landowners. It is true that many proprietors did take an extremely active part in promoting fisheries and manufactures, but such activities are not part of the business of the landlord as

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such, and he could hardly be blamed for not trying them, or for trying them and doing them badly. On the other hand the management of his estate was the landlord's business, and most eighteenth century writers took it for granted that he was under a social obligation to do it in a satisfactory way.

The method of coping with the situation advocated by the second group came within the sphere of the landowners, and appealed very strongly to those with a bent for agrarian improvements. Its essential feature was the consolidation of the existing small Highland farms into units of a more profitable size. In many cases the consolidation was accompanied by the introduction of sheep, but in others it was done to make easy the carrying through of general farming improvements.

There is not space here to enter fully into the prolonged controversy over the relative merits of small and large farms. At this particular stage, there were ranged on the side of the large farms most of the experienced improvers of the Lowlands; most of the writers of agricultural reports, Highland as well as Lowland; and a very large number of writers in the *Old Statistical Account*. It is safe to say, that the general consensus of opinion was, that the Highland farms had been so subdivided that it was impossible for the farmers to hope to live on them with any decent comfort.

Notice that this is not intended to apply to land in process of being reclaimed from the waste, when a small unit was often regarded as an advantage, but to the ordinary Highland grazing farm which, for geographical reasons, seemed likely to remain the normal type, whether the stock kept was sheep or black cattle. The writer who made the most elaborate defence of the small Highland farm was Brown.¹ He gave figures to show that a small tenant farmer might live comfortably, and yet, in many cases pay a higher rent per acre than the big farmer. But Brown partly destroyed his own case when he explained how this was to be done. The small farmer was to have some subsidiary means of support in the shape of fishing or kelp making, and it was from his profit from them that he was to pay his high rent. This could hardly be regarded as a satisfactory defence of the small farm, for it not only implied a most unfair relationship between owner and tenant, but it could only apply

¹ *Strictures and Remarks on the Earl of Selkirk's Observations on the Present State of the Highlands of Scotland.* Sheriff-Substitute Brown of Inverness-shire. 1806.

to the very limited areas which had the natural facilities for fisheries or kelp works.

We need not go further into this controversy at the moment. It is sufficient to say, that there was a fair amount of evidence to justify a number of landlords in coming to the conclusion, that they could only improve their estates and raise the level of their tenantry by following the Lowland practice of uniting farms.

Where the policy was adopted it certainly did raise the standard of living. Not only did the tenant of the good sized sheep or cattle farm live prosperously, but his servants enjoyed a degree of comfort far beyond what they had done as small independent holders.¹ Garnett² who disliked the development of sheep farming intensely, admitted that the shepherds were much better off than the very small cattle farmers had ever been. The ministers of Kilmalie, Fortingal, and other parishes give evidence of the same sort from direct observation.

But the policy, while so far successful, had one obvious drawback: its immediate effect was to diminish, not increase, the available amount of work. True, this difficulty could sometimes be got over in districts where some subsidiary occupation existed or could be developed, or where there was waste land to be brought into cultivation, but these conditions were not always present. If the policy was to be universally applied throughout the Highlands and Hebrides, it must inevitably lead to a rise in the general standard of living, but also to a considerable amount of emigration, or migration. Most of its advocates were willing to admit this, but argued like the Earl of Selkirk, that the transfer of part of a population was better than allowing the whole population to continue in a state of semi-destitution.

This argument was in its own way unanswerable. At the same time a policy which got rid of unemployment by the simple method of getting rid of the unemployed obviously left something to be desired. It was in the nature of a last resort.

Such was the feeling of many proprietors. Some of them had voluntarily abstained from introducing sheep farming because they feared the effects would be disastrous to the small tenants, and they had been disheartened by finding that the sacrifice of their own profits left the tenantry in the same stage of wretched poverty as before. A policy of consolidating farms would not help such landlords, for if they could not provide for

¹ *General View of the Agriculture of Perthshire.* Robertson. 1799.

² *Observations on a Tour through the Highlands.* Garnett. 1800.

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tenants to be displaced by sheep, neither could they provide alternative occupations for those displaced by the enlargement of cattle or other farms. What was wanted was a policy which would be within the scope of the landlords and which would raise the general level of life, without causing any serious removal of the inhabitants.

It was the opinion of several contemporary writers, that such a policy could be found without much difficulty, if only the owners would take sufficient trouble. Some of these writers insisted that the greed and indifference of the landlords were the chief, if not the only, causes of the deplorable condition of the tenants; others, like Macdonald,¹ paid a high tribute to the kindness of the proprietors, but thought that their outlook was too limited; all were agreed, that whether the cause was to be found in the greed or the negligence, the conservatism or the stupidity of the owner, the average Highland estate was not well managed, and that it was quite possible by changes to raise the general standard of living, and at the same time to supply enough work for all those inhabitants who were at present practically unemployed.

What we propose to consider now is :

(a) What were these proposed changes from which so much was hoped ?

(b) How far was it possible for the owners to adopt them ?

(c) To what extent did their complete adoption meet all the requirements of the situation ?

If we collect the various suggestions made by different contemporaries on the subject of estate management, the following is a summary of the programme mapped out for the proprietor :

1. He should try, by residence, to make himself thoroughly acquainted with the needs and circumstances of his own estate.

2. He should take measures to provide his tenants with houses suitable for human habitation.

3. He should refrain from rack renting.

4. He should give his tenants proper security of tenure.

5. He should take measures to introduce as far as possible all the improved farming methods that had been found to work well in the Lowlands, *e.g.*

the division of runrigged lands into independent holdings,
the abolition of out-field and in-field,

¹ *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides.* Macdonald. 1811.

the creation of proper fences, drains and enclosures,
the insistence on proper attention to breeding,
the introduction of green crops,
the introduction of better implements, etc.

6. He should also proceed to reclaim whatever waste land on his estate was capable of it.

Before discussing these suggestions in detail, it is essential to recall one of the characteristic features of old Highland estate management. It must not be forgotten that the Highland proprietor was not always in direct relations with all the persons holding farms on his estate. Where estates were still being run on the old system, there remained the normal division of farmers into tacksmen and subtenants. With the subtenants, who would form the major part of the tenantry on such an estate, the landlord had practically no direct contact.

It is true, that as the century advanced the middlemen were gradually being eliminated, but the process was very far from complete by the end of the eighteenth century. As late as 1808, 40,000 persons in the Hebrides,—practically half the population,—still held their farms as subtenants, and in Sutherland the indirect tenure was still the normal. The tacksmen, it will be remembered, held leases, often of great length, and they could only be got rid of when their leases expired, or in special cases, when sums, borrowed by the proprietor from the wadsetter tacksmen on the security of a farm, were repaid. Resumption of his direct control over all his tenants might therefore at any particular time be either legally or practically impossible for a Highland owner. The importance of this fact will become apparent later.

Absenteeism. The first and most immediate improvement which the landlord could make was to reside and take an interest in his estate. According to Macdonald, three-fifths of the Hebridean proprietors were non-resident, and the proportion on the mainland was probably similar. The drawbacks to this absentee habit were obvious.

The presence of the owners was urgently needed to give a lead to improvements of all sorts, a point which we shall touch upon again. In their failure to do this, the absentee landlord was not the only offender; not infrequently the tacksman also was an absentee and rent lifter,¹ and the unfortunate subtenant was left without guidance of any kind.

¹ *Forfeited Estate Papers* (Lovat Papers). Scottish Historical Society.

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Residence of the proprietors would also have prevented their making serious mistakes from pure ignorance, when they came to fix terms of rent and leases.

More important still, it would probably have prevented a considerable amount of oppression by the factors, examples of which were given by many authorities. Pennant mentioned a bad case in Cannay on Clanronald's estates; Knox gave one in Harris; Sir George Mackenzie stated that most of Ross-shire was managed by factors who often made more profits than the owners, and deliberately multiplied the number of small tenants for the sake of the gain from their services. Sir John Sinclair, writing of Sutherland in 1795, indicated what were probably the main abuses when he suggested that all large estates should be split up amongst several factors to avoid giving one man too much power, or too much work to do properly, and that no factor should be allowed to accept services or presents from the tenants.

The presence of the landowner was particularly necessary where the farmer had small holdings and no leases, since that type of farmer was peculiarly at the factor's mercy. It was equally necessary on estates where the farming methods remained of a very backward type, and were not likely to be altered except by the personal encouragement and example of the landlord.

At the same time it is possible to lay too much stress on the value of constant residence. The owner of great and widely scattered estates could not be always in residence on them all, but it was not these great estates which were worst managed. Macdonald, though a very severe critic of the absentee, admitted that 'the best managed estates are of considerable size, some of them indeed the very largest of all.' The Argyll estates might be taken as a fair example of this.

What was wanted was a landowning class, that kept in close touch with what happened on its estates, but was not so isolated as to lose touch completely with the general current of ideas on the subject of improvements.

Housing. The condition of housing in the Highlands was due partly to the fact that it was the traditional, and even at the end of the eighteenth century still the normal, practice for tenants to build their own houses. The part of the landlord was generally limited to supplying a certain amount of timber and other materials. Houses so built did not last long enough to give rise to any questions of compensation when a tenant left.

In some areas they were built of earth, and every five or seven years were destroyed and added to the dunghill.¹

The housing of the smaller Highland tenants was frankly deplorable. We quote the following passage from Macdonald which referred particularly to the Hebrides, but which was equally applicable to conditions on the mainland, wherever the problem had not been specially tackled by improving owners: 'Three fourths of the forty-thousand cottagers of these Isles live in hovels which would disgrace any Indian tribe; and many of them are found on islands of the first rank in point of population and extent. At least seven thousand of the natives of Lewis (for instance) know nothing of a chimney, gable, glass-window, house flooring, or even hearth-stone by their own experience at home.'²

By the end of the eighteenth century the districts which had made most advance in housing, were those where the system of big farms and day labourers or cottagers had replaced the old system of small tenant farmers. This is not surprising. No serious improvement could be made in housing until the landlords took over the responsibility of building. If the landlord, however, put up solid structures, it would involve considerable expense, and he would expect to get back the interest on his outlay in the form of increased rents. But the small tenants could not, as things were, pay any such increase, and it is certain that given a choice they would have preferred to continue in their hovels rather than accept such an alternative.

In spite of these difficulties some landlords had faced the problem with very fair success. On the Argyll and Breadalbane estates something had been done before the end of the century, and in the Hebrides, Campbell of Shawfield and the smaller proprietors in Gigha and Colonsay had set a comparatively decent standard. In justice to the proprietors, it is only fair to mention that the expense of putting up solid buildings in the Highlands, particularly in the Hebrides, was considerably greater than in the Lowlands. Materials had often to be brought from a great distance, the difficulties of transport were enormous, and skilled artisan labour was often not to be had. Macdonald calculated, that in the Hebrides, a house that could be erected for £100 in the Lowlands, would cost £150, and that it would only last fifteen years instead of twenty, under the

¹ O.S.A. Kiltearn, Ross-shire.

² *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides*, Macdonald, 1811.

greater stress of the weather conditions. Housing was certainly not a simple problem in the Highlands, but judging from the examples of the better estates, it was not insoluble, and many landlords might have done a great deal more to solve it than they did. At the same time the housing question must be considered in relation to the main Highland problem. There was nothing to be gained by putting up substantial houses on an estate, if the inhabitants could find no means of making a living there.

Rents. How far was the poverty of the Highlanders due to exorbitant rents? Some writers thought it was the main cause, but the more constructive critics were not amongst them. Still we must note in passing, that the minister of Kilcalmonnell and Kilberry felt so strongly on the subject that he proposed that there should be a statute passed regulating them.

Rents had certainly risen in the Highlands, though in very different proportions in different areas. In 1795 they had risen in North Uist by 33 per cent., and in Glenorchy parish by 200 to 300 per cent. Rents moreover continued to rise; Macdonald reckoned in 1811 that rents in the Hebrides had been multiplied by five since the process started, while from other sources it would appear that the rentals of the Forfeited Estates had been multiplied by six before 1806.

In connection with these facts certain things have to be remembered.

During the same period the rise of rents in the Lowlands averaged about 300 per cent., and the rise was accompanied not only by great advances in agriculture, but also by a general improvement in the standards of life.

Secondly, the rise of Highland rents was occasionally due to quite abnormal circumstances such as the suitability of a particular farm for kelp manufacture. A kelp farm in the Hebrides would sometimes yield five times as great a return for the capital expended, as the corresponding arable farm.

Thirdly, it must be remembered that where the middleman system was still in vogue, the increase in rents was not necessarily due to the proprietor, nor did he necessarily reap any share in the proceeds. Macdonald admitted that there were many tacksmen farmers in the Hebrides holding huge farms of several thousand acres at almost nominal rents; yet the subtenants of these did not apparently enjoy similar privileges. Sheriff Substitute Brown mentioned a case in Harris, where the pro-

prietor, after removing the tacksmen, was able to raise the rent he got personally from £895 to £3500, and the old subtenants were better off than they had been before.

Fourthly, the districts where the rents had risen comparatively little, were not those which showed the greatest signs of prosperity. Marshall¹ gave as his verdict, that as the small tenants farmed in the Central Highlands, they would still be wretchedly poor even if they paid no rents whatever, and his view is corroborated by several of the *Old Statistical Account* writers

High rents did not necessarily produce poverty in the Highlands any more than low rents necessarily produced prosperity. Most of the misconceptions surrounding the subject arose from not distinguishing clearly between the people who were asked to pay the rents. It might be said that there were three varieties of 'high rents' in the Highlands.

There were rents so high that they could hardly be paid under any system of farm management known at the time. Such rents might be the result of pure greed on the part of the owner or tacksmen; they might be due to a foolish miscalculation of the value of the land; they might be due to an idea, not uncommon at the time, that the value of the land could best be fixed by putting it up to open auction, a method which in the existing state of land famine could hardly fail to force up rents to an impossible pitch. But rackrenting of this sort was not common. Macdonald stated that it was most unusual in the Hebrides, and that bidding for farms whether by public auction or private bargain was very rare. Occasional cases of the sort could hardly account therefore for all the poverty of the Hebrides.

There were high rents which could not possibly be paid by the small cattle farmer, but which could be paid without any difficulty by the big sheep farmer. The minister of the parish of Glenorchy where rents had tripled spoke in glowing terms of the increased comfort enjoyed by people of all classes.

There were high rents, which could be paid by the tenants of well managed cattle or arable farms, but which could certainly not be paid, while the latter remained in their aboriginal condition. The tenants on the improved estates of Islay paid as high rents as any in the Hebrides, yet they presented an appearance in every way superior to lower rented farmers on other islands.

¹ *General View of the Agriculture of the Central Highlands*, Marshall, 1794.

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The saner critics of Highland estate management, while viewing some rents as excessive, did not greatly stress the point, though it was observed by them that in the Highlands, the general rise in rents was more in the nature of unearned increment than the corresponding increase in the Lowlands; where the increases were much more often spent on solid improvements beneficial to the tenants. Still, with this reservation, the critics seemed agreed that if the owners managed their estates well, there was nothing to prevent them getting high rents without oppressing their people. They found the real grievance, not in the amount the tenant had to pay, but in the uncertainty regarding it. The uncertainty might arise, either from the tenant being still liable to irregular demands for personal services, or from the possibility of a fresh rise in rent at any moment, in other words from the want of leases.

Services. According to Knox,¹ it was possible for tenants to be required to give forty-two days of service in the year, and these days might be chosen at the very season when a man would be naturally busy on his own farm. Knox did not say that these services were normally exacted, in fact he admitted that the custom of servitude was dying out rapidly in the Western Highlands, and that in this respect they were considerably in advance of Caithness, and most of the North Country Lowlands.

For exact information about services the *Old Statistical Account* is the best source of information.

On the mainland of Argyllshire and in Perthshire the custom had evidently ceased to be of much importance. Where it existed, as in Lismore and Appin, it was less burdensome than Knox suggested. In that parish the services amounted to six or seven days yearly, on general work, and two or three days on road work, and usually some allowance was made for the work done; even in this parish the whole system was rapidly becoming obsolete.

As usual in the eighteenth century it was in Sutherland and in the Hebrides that the most sensational conditions prevailed. In the Hebrides² the services exacted sometimes came to five days work a week; in Reay (Sutherland) they varied from twenty to one hundred and twenty days a year; in Loth and Edderachylis (Sutherland) in 1795 the rents were still sometimes paid entirely in services which were quite unlimited in amount.

¹ *View of the British Empire*, Knox, 1785.

² *Travels*, Buchanan, 1793.

In cases like the last mentioned the services probably covered all sorts of agricultural operations. In general the common sort of services demanded were : the cutting, stacking, and housing of peats ; sowing and harvesting ; carting and thatching ; road making ; more rarely the spinning of a certain quantity of wool or flax ; and in some of the kelp islands in the Hebrides, the making of kelp.

The drawbacks of the servitude system are too obvious to call for much comment. It kept the tenant in a disheartening state of insecurity ; it caused his own holding to be badly neglected ; and it gave to the person receiving the services an extremely inefficient supply of labour. Undoubtedly where the services remained, they contributed to the miserable condition of the Highland tenantry.

On the other hand two facts must be remembered. Services were retained in some districts solely because it was impossible to persuade the people to work as day-labourers. There is abundant evidence that the small tenant often preferred to keep his family quite idle rather than have them act in that capacity. In the face of this psychological phenomenon, a big farmer with work to be done would be tempted to hold on to any services that he had it in his power to exact. The remedy for this was in the hands of the small tenants themselves.

The second thing to notice was, who got the benefit of the services ? Here there seems hardly any doubt at all that it was the middlemen and not the proprietors. The districts where the services first became obsolete were those in which the owners first took over direct dealings with the subtenants ; the districts where they lingered longest were those in which the middlemen survived. Apart from that, Buchanan and Sheriff-Substitute Brown, and the Old Statistical writers for Reay, Edderachylis and other Highland parishes, all deliberately made the contrast between the attitude of the proprietors and the attitude of the tacksmen towards services ; the former easy in his demands, the latter insisting on his utmost rights ; the former ready when approached to commute his claims into a reasonable money payment, the latter generally quite inexorable. The only definite case which Knox himself mentioned of oppressive services proved to be that of a tacksmen in Harris.

The attitude of the tacksmen was of course partly comprehensible, since he had to get labour in some way, and the Highland temperament made it difficult for him to get it by ordinary

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methods. A landowner who was not actually farming land had no similar problem to face. At the same time the middleman's use of his powers was often most unnecessarily harsh, and the whole system worked out badly for both parties and was best abolished. What we wish to emphasise is, that the comparative slowness of its disappearance in some areas was not due to the attitude of the owners who were abolishing it as fast as the terms of the tacksmen's leases would permit.

Leases. The insecurity of the small Highland tenants lay less in the uncertain demands for services than in the general absence of leases. The average small farmer either held a short lease of under seven years, or more commonly was simply a tenant at will. The absence or shortness of leases was commented on adversely by practically every writer who sincerely desired the improvement of the Highlands or a higher standard of living for their inhabitants; Macdonald went so far as to say—'The want of them is the most fruitful source of emigration and distress.'¹

Where leases did exist they were far from perfect. Macdonald thought that they were generally too complex, and urged that the stipulations in them should be made simpler, fewer, and more adapted to Highland farming conditions. As examples of absurd clauses, he mentioned some contained in certain Hebridean leases which insisted on kelp farmers raising turnips, which would have to be sown in June at the time when they were most occupied with kelp-making—and others which insisted on the destructive and futile practice of enclosing sand banks. Knox also complained of the custom still existing in some parts of charging a fine called a *grassum* for the renewal of a lease. But he admitted the custom was not general, and not specially peculiar to the Highland districts.

The general advantages of a system of long leases seemed indisputable. Eighteenth century writers had also immediately before them the example of Lowland Scotland, where a succession of improving farmers, encouraged by favourable leases, had in the course of two generations brought the land from extreme barrenness into a high state of cultivation—their own standard of life advancing with the improvement made.

¹ It is worth noting that Sheriff-Substitute Brown alleged that the emigrations from Clanronald's estates were of tenants who held beneficial leases, and it was by selling the reversion of these that the emigrants got enough money to pay their passage to America.

In some Highland districts the burden of making any capital improvements was still left, according to the old custom, to be borne by the tenants. In practice this usually meant that no such improvements were made, a state of things that might be attributed in part to the want of leases. A farmer was not likely to embark on any expensive improvements if he thought that the immediate result would be to raise the valuation of his farm and increase his rent, before he had had any time to repay himself for his own outlay and trouble. The obvious way to encourage him seemed to be to grant him a lease of respectable length, and the slowness of the landlords to adopt this policy laid them open to the charge of neglecting both the interests of their tenants and the interests of the country.

It would be unfair to the landlords to suppose that no estates had adopted the policy of leases for all tenants.

A great impetus in this direction had been given by the Commissioners of the Forfeited Estates. Their motives were political as well as economic, for they believed that by giving the small farmer an independent position they were minimising the danger of future Jacobite rebellions. An anonymous writer in 1750 who shared their view suggested 'that a law be enacted to Oblige all Landlords among the disaffected Clans to give long Written Leases to their Tenants none to be for a shorter Term than twenty Years, and that every man who lives by Husbandry or Grazing in those Countries have such a lease from the landlord or his Steward. . . . By this means the Tenants will Enjoy the Fruits of their own Industry and know the Sweets of Peace and Liberty; which will put it out of the Power of their Tyrant Chiefs to Induce them to Rebel against a Government to whom they will be indebted for everything they possess.'¹

No Act was passed binding the landlords, but the Commissioners themselves put the policy suggested into effect on the Forfeited Estates, and landowners became familiar with the spectacle of small tenants in possession of leases.

To do the owners justice, some of them had anticipated the policy of the Commissioners. As far back as 1737 Duncan Forbes was authorised to offer leases to the under tenants on the Argyll estates in Morven. The leases were for nineteen years, a fair length according to prevailing standards. Forbes, in referring to them, does not speak as if they were a novelty except in that particular area.

¹ MSS. 1750, edited Lang 1895.

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Later in the century the Marquis of Breadalbane, Lord Macdonald, Campbell of Islay, and a little later the Sutherland family, were distinguished by their willingness to grant leases of reasonable length.

In spite of these notable exceptions the end of the eighteenth century saw most Highland tenants still holding their farms from year to year, a state of things which many writers promptly put down at once either to the gross tyranny, or the hopeless stupidity, of the landowning class. But when we come to look into the matter of lease-granting the whole question was not quite so simple as appeared on the surface.

There were several kinds of landlords who were slow to grant long leases. Some were of the kindly paternal type, beloved by the romantic writers, and their slowness was part of their traditional conservatism which opposed alike improvements or evictions; some were frankly greedy and did not choose to give up the possibility of raising rents; some approved of the general policy of leases, but were held back by a variety of practical obstacles; while some quite thoughtful landlords were not convinced that leases were going to improve matters,—they were particularly doubtful of the value of leases to small tenants without capital, and they thought that the Lowland analogy had no useful bearing upon circumstances so entirely different.

If we consider first the practical obstacles it will be found that some were anything but imaginary. It was too often forgotten that while the majority of the small tenants might be holding from year to year, the whole estate so far as the proprietor was concerned might be let out on lease. The situation is exactly similar to that which arose in connection with personal services.

On old-fashioned estates where practically all the land was held on lease by the tacksmen the owner had no direct power of granting leases to the subtenants. As for the middlemen themselves, their attitude towards granting leases, like their attitude towards the abolition of services, was much more decidedly conservative than that of the landlords.

To introduce a general system of leases generally meant that proprietors must start by getting rid of the middlemen; that is, they must start by destroying the whole social order with which they were familiar, and an order often defended warmly by the same writers who blamed the owners for the want of leases.

It is true that the landlords stood to gain from the abolition

of the middleman system, and that most of them were willing to proceed with it, but obviously a change of such importance could not be made so easily as the ordinary signing of a lease. However willing the owner might be, the process took time, some of the tacksmen's leases being for long periods like ninety-nine years.

The legal right of a leaseholder to sublet part of his land was not seriously questioned until the case of *Roughhead v. Mudie* in 1686-7, when the Court of Session decided in favour of the leaseholder. Subsequent decisions are not entirely consistent on the point, but the case of *Simpson v. Gray* upheld the theory that the power of subletting was implied in a long lease.

It was obviously difficult, if not legally impossible, for proprietors to get rid of the middleman system without getting rid of the middlemen themselves, and that they could only do gradually as the tacks expired.

This was the most serious practical obstacle to the grant of leases to the small farmers.

A minor one lay in the fact that the typical Highland farm was generally held in common by from four to eight persons. Such a system obviously involved a good many administrative difficulties even when the tenants held from year to year. A lease which would cover all the contingencies that might arise in such a common holding—tenants dying—tenants failing to pay their share, etc.—obviously required to be somewhat complex, a fact that should be remembered in view of Macdonald's demand that leases should be made simpler and less clogged with burdensome conditions. This particular difficulty was eventually got rid of by the abolition of the common holding, but that also was obviously not a thing that could be done in a moment.

These practical difficulties prevented some owners from carrying out the recommendations about leases, but there were others whose inaction was deliberate.

Some owners withheld leases from the small tenants because they considered their present situation was a purely temporary one. The point has already arisen in connection with sheep farming. Many Hebridean proprietors wished to turn part of their estates into sheep runs, but had refrained from doing so at a great financial sacrifice, because they could think of no suitable or happy way of providing for the tenants who would

have to be displaced. Still could such a way be found, sheep farming was their eventual object, and they naturally did not choose to make its introduction impossible by granting long leases to the existing farmers. The other considerations that weighed with the owners were more subtle.

It must be remembered that leases were still associated in the landlord's mind with the old middleman system, and an evil odour hung therefore about them. A landlord who had just seen with his own eyes the very positive evils resulting from allowing his estate to pass out of his personal control, naturally wanted a considerable amount of convincing before he was willing to make what might be the same blunder in a slightly different form.

Secondly, he was liable to be influenced by the fact that the small tenants were not always as eager for leases as the writers imagined. In 1737 Forbes of Culloden paid the visit already mentioned to certain parts of the Argyll estates and was instructed to offer leases of nineteen years to all classes of tenants. To his astonishment the small tenants refused to pay the same rents to the Duke as they had been willing to pay previously to their tacksmen masters when they held from year to year. Many of them rejected the leases altogether.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century two cases of a similar kind are mentioned by Brown. One was on the estate of Clanronald in 1802, the other on the estates of Lord Macdonald in 1803.

In the latter case leases were offered to the tenants of an area which contained a population of over four thousand persons, but only the tenants of two farms accepted them.

It is true that all these cases were somewhat exceptional. On the Argyll estates the refusal seemed due to an organised conspiracy of the tacksmen; in the instances cited by Brown the tenants wished to leave themselves free to emigrate at any moment. Still, whatever the reasons,¹ the fact remained that leases were not always welcomed with enthusiasm by the tenants themselves.

¹ Cf. following quotation from *General View of the Agriculture of Midlothian* :

‘In some of the moorland parts of the county the tenants still remain without any lease whatever; but this is not owing so much to their landlords, who are willing enough to grant it, as to themselves, who have an aversion at being bound by such an express engagement; rather preferring the greater freedom that results to them from a paction which endures only for a single year.’

There was also another consideration present to the mind of the owner. Enthusiastic writers were trying to persuade him that leases to everyone meant high farming and general prosperity, and they pointed to the Lowlands for proof. But the Highland proprietor sometimes preferred to consult his own experience. His tacksmen had held long leases on particularly easy and generous terms, and therefore according to the argument ought to have been advanced farmers, but the landlord knew that in actual fact they had been nothing of the sort. Eager advocates of leases like Macdonald admitted that the old tacksmen were the most fatal obstacle to improvements of any kind.

The tacksmen had had the absolute security of tenure which reformers demanded, and the only apparent result had been that for generations all advance of any kind had been stopped. If this was the effect of low rents and security upon the Highland temperament of the upper class, what proof had the proprietor that it would affect the lower class differently? Perhaps the first flush of pride in possession of a lease might produce an outburst of energy, but after the novelty was gone would not the subtenants just go the same way as their social superiors?

So many landlords argued, and if they were slow to accept all the rose-coloured pictures that the enthusiasts painted, and if they tended to make rather elaborate stipulations in the leases they granted, they were not entirely without some defence.

Even Macdonald admitted that there was something to be said for their point of view. He himself thought it inadvisable to grant the Highland farmers leases longer than twenty-five years. The rents also were not to be fixed too low and there should be some definite conditions attached. Macdonald drew up a list of stipulations which he thought should be inserted into every lease to safeguard the interests of both parties. On the one hand the owner was to give compensation for improvements made, on the other, the tenant was to bind himself not to sublet his farm even to his own family without the landlord's consent, and was to bind himself to adopt a proper rotation of crops and a proper method of cultivation. Macdonald was obviously not too certain of the capabilities of the small farmers, and many landlords shared his doubts.

It is probable that attention to all the points raised above—more constant residence by proprietors, better housing of the tenants, moderate rents for the small cattle farmers, abolition of services, and a general system of leases—would have done

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something to improve the conditions of a section of the Highland population. None of them, however, touch on the extremely difficult problem of creating a sufficiency of work for the many wholly or partly unemployed inhabitants. It remains to be seen in a subsequent article how far that problem was likely to be solved by the landlords putting into effect the various suggestions made about estate improvements and reclamations.

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Eighteenth Century Highland Landlords and the Poverty Problem

IN the previous part of this article¹ we discussed some of the suggestions made by contemporary writers for the improvement of the eighteenth century Highlands. We tried to show how far these suggestions had been or were being put into effect; what were the practical or psychological obstacles which prevented their progress being more rapid; and how far the suggested policy, if fully carried out, would have met the needs of the situation.

The conclusion arrived at was, that security of tenure, decent housing, and reasonable rents would have relieved the situation of some of the Highland farmers, but they could not be expected to provide a complete solution for a problem the crux of which lay in a present excess of population. They created no new demand for labour, and their benefit to the farmers depended mostly on the hope that they would be accompanied by radical improvements in Highland farming methods.

The reformers themselves, feeling the insufficiency of mere changes in tenure, urged the Highland owners to make haste in matters of farming to follow the example of improving proprietors in the Lowlands.

Before the sheep era, the typical Highland agrarian unit was the medium-sized cattle farm rented by a group of tenants, either from a superior tenant, or directly from the owner. Such

¹ See *Scottish Historical Review*, xix. p. 1.

a farm would include a small portion of arable, some meadow and heathy pasture, with probably grazing rights over a considerable tract of mountain.¹ The arable was sometimes held and worked in common, but more often it was divided on the runridge principle, each tenant having his own strips, separated from those of the other tenants by turf balks. As in the unimproved Lowlands, the cultivated land was divided into in-field and out-field; the former got practically all the manure, and was kept constantly under crop; the latter got no manure but that of the animals folded upon it, but was also kept under crop as long as it would bear.

Enclosures were very rare. Occasionally there was a *march dyke* separating one farm from another. In a hilly area this would invariably run vertically up the hill, stopping when it reached the mountain pasture common to all the farms; in such a case there would probably also be a *head-dyke* dividing the farms proper from the higher slopes. Often the only enclosure would be that separating two estates.

Rents were paid from the profits of the black cattle, which were usually sold to southern drovers. Crops were raised, not for the market, but to supply the food for the farmers' households, and to keep the animals alive during winter. Very often they failed to do either. Apart from a few favoured districts, the Highlands, except in good years, had to import grain for food, and a large proportion of the live stock perished every winter from want.

Such was the old system, a system which gave an extremely miserable living to the farmers, and left practically no margin for rents either reasonable or unreasonable.

In connection with it, we must remember that the Highland farmer laboured under several serious geographical drawbacks, the chief of which were the nature of the climate² and the soil,

¹ Marshall, *General View of the Agriculture of the Central Highlands*, 1794.

² The Rev. John Warrick of Cumnock calls attention to one source of poverty to which Samuel Johnson refers in his *Journey to the Western Isles*. 'Mull,' he says, 'had suffered like Skye by the black winter of seventy-one, in which, contrary to all experience, a continued frost detained the snow eight weeks upon the ground. Against a calamity never known no provision had been made, and the people could only pine in helpless misery. One tenant was mentioned, whose cattle perished to the value of three hundred pounds—a loss which probably more than the life of man is necessary to repair. . . . In Mull the disappointment of a harvest, or a murrain among the cattle, cuts off the regular provision; and they who have no manufactures can purchase no part of the superfluities of other coun-

and the remoteness from good town markets. The climate and soil were a serious hindrance to grain cultivation; the distance from markets practically destroyed the value of the minor produce, such as milk, eggs and butter.

It is true that none of these difficulties were insuperable. It was possible to modify both climate and soil by enclosures, by planting, and by draining the swamps. It was possible to create markets by better communication, and by the encouragement of towns and villages.¹ But as matters stood at the end of the eighteenth century these obstacles were serious.

A few writers like Macdonald² believed that a considerable extension of grain cultivation would have been possible and profitable, particularly in the Hebrides. This opinion was not generally shared by their contemporaries. The opposite opinion was stated with great vigour by the minister³ of the parish of Kilmuir, Skye, who spoke with some authority, having struggled with grain crops upon his own glebe. His experience was that it was madness to try to cultivate anything there more exacting than sown grasses.

Possibly this view was somewhat exaggerated, but there was certainly nothing in Highland experience to warrant the hope that any general measure for converting the existing cattle into arable farms was likely to meet with any success. Even if such a transformation had been possible, it is doubtful if it would have done much to solve the poverty and unemployment problems of the Highlands. It remained, then, for the landlord to do what he could towards making the existing cattle farms more profitable.

The weaknesses of the existing system were sufficiently obvious.

Carelessness in selecting Breeds. This was invariable amongst the tenant class who formed the problem.⁴ Even the big Highland sheep farmers generally failed in competition with Lowland stock breeders on that account, and if the men with money enough to embark on sheep-raising were indiscriminate in their selection of breeds, the small cattle farmer usually failed to grasp the fact that any choice of stock existed. If by any chance there

tries. The consequence of a bad season is here not scarcity, but emptiness; and they whose plenty was barely a supply of natural and present need, when that slender stock fails, must perish with hunger.'

¹ Knox, *Tour through the Highlands*, 1786.

² Macdonald, *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides*, 1811.

³ *Old Statistical Account*.

⁴ O.S.A. Monivaird and Strowan, etc.

was a farmer who took the question seriously, it was practically impossible for him to do anything so long as his pastures were all unenclosed, and his beasts mixed freely with those of the other tenants.

Overstocking. This was more immediately disastrous than even the casual method of choosing stock. The situation on the average Highland farm was that, with a large extent of available summer pasture, there was relatively a very small quantity of food available for the animals over winter. But few Highland farmers were proof against the temptation offered by the summer grazing; practically all attempted to keep a number of beasts which they could not possibly provide food for during the winter. The result was inevitable. Every spring saw the herds terribly depleted by deaths from starvation, while the beasts that survived were reduced to mere skin and bone, and ruined for all purposes.¹

In the parish of Glenorchy, 510 cattle of all ages, the property of a single person, died in one season from starvation.² As late as 1808, in Kildonan, Sutherlandshire, there perished from want in a single spring, 300 horses, 126 cows, 500 cattle, and this though every second calf had been killed to give the others a chance.

Obviously the difficulty of finding enough winter food for the cattle was a serious one, and it was intensified by the extraordinary number of horses supported on a Highland farm. These were partly superfluous and partly made necessary by the poorness of the farm implements and the badness of the Highland roads.

Undoubtedly one of the most pressing tasks for the Highland landowner was to persuade his tenants to make their stock correspond with the feeding capacity of their farms, either by decreasing the number of animals, or, if possible, by increasing the amount of winter food stuffs.

Poor Cultivation. At the root of the food problem was the wider question of the general backwardness of Highland cultivation. At the end of the eighteenth century there were few parts of the Highlands or Hebrides where any green crop other than potatoes was grown. Turnips and sown grasses were either unknown or unheeded by the small cattle farmer.

The grain crops were generally very poor. The in-field and out-field system left one part of the land practically barren, and

¹ Marshall, *Central Highlands*.

² *O.S.A. Glenorchy*.

kept the other foul with weeds, while climate made the harvest late, so late that often the crop could never be lifted.

Matters were not improved by the type of implement used. The *caschrom*, the crooked Highland spade, though slow and uneconomical compared with a proper plough, was not ineffective, and was useful on some sorts of land where ploughing was hardly possible. But the ordinary Highland plough itself was extremely clumsy and unsatisfactory; the light, wooden harrows used were practically useless; while many of the most valuable implements common in the Lowlands were simply unknown. Under these circumstances, grain crops were often deplorable; in the parish of Kilbride, in Arran, it was reckoned that the best land only yielded two returns.

Want of Enclosures. Cultivation was further held back by the subdivision of the arable fields into ridges, and by the want of proper enclosures. Macdonald reckoned that in 1808, in Arran, Mull, Skye, Jura and the Long Island, there were still 800,000 acres without enclosures of any kind. The want of enclosures made it useless for individuals to experiment with green crops, and on the spongy arable land common in the Highlands good culture was impossible so long as the cattle continued each year after harvest to overrun the arable fields and destroy the surface of the soil. The difference in productive power between enclosed and unenclosed lands was so great that farms which had with difficulty yielded 2d. an acre, could readily pay three shillings an acre after enclosure.

These being the weak points of Highland farming, the line of policy for the landlord seemed clearly indicated.

An owner could restrict the disastrous practice of overstocking, though no doubt he would be regarded, in the first instance, as a brutal tyrant for doing so; he might insist, though it would not be quite so simple, on the abolition of out-field and in-field, and the adoption of a regular system of rotation of crops; he might replace the runrig holdings with compact, enclosed farms. It was also possible for him to improve conditions by draining damp lands, by making plantations that would give shelter in exposed areas. Finally, on his home farm the landlord might experiment with new crops and implements, and so give his tenants some practical illustrations of what might be done with the land.

A general policy of this kind was actively pursued on the lands administered by the Forfeited Estates Commissioners from

the time of the fifties onward. It was followed to a greater or less degree on the great estates of Argyll and Breadalbane, and after 1795 on the possessions of the Sutherland family. It was taken up by Dempster of Dunnichen on his lands at Criech. It directed the activities of the Hebridian improvers, Lord Macdonald, M'Lean of Coll, M'Leod of Raasay, the Macneills of Barra, Colonsay, and Gigha, and most zealous improver of all, Campbell of Shawfield.

On many Highland estates, however, the improvements, even when begun, never got beyond the home farm. It might be found well drained, well cultivated, properly enclosed, with a good rotation of crops, and the newest implements in use, while beside it the farms of the tenants remained in their aboriginal condition.

The backwardness of Highland farming, at a time when the Lowlands were advancing rapidly in the path of progress, led to very unfavourable comparisons being drawn between the Highland and Lowland owners. The public spirit and energy of the latter were constantly contrasted with the apathy and ignorance of the former. The comparison was sometimes just, especially as regards many small Highland proprietors who lived outside the influence of the agrarian revolution movement; some of them were indifferent, and most of them were intensely conservative. But it was not only on the estates of such proprietors that the improvements mentioned advanced slowly.

One of the things which the critics tended to forget was that the Lowland progress had been due as much to the tenants as to the owners. But if the average Highland landowner seemed dubious of the advantages of the new methods, and strangely unimpressed by the propaganda of the scientific agriculturists of his day, how much more was this the case with the tenants who possessed the same conservative temperament as the owner, quite unmodified by any contact with the non-Highland mind. Yet it was with this material that the proprietor had to carry through the elaborate programme of reforms.

Further, it must be remembered that, apart from a few families, the Highland landlords were not rich. Their estates had received no accidental increment from proximity to growing manufacturing towns, and they had no mineral wealth. Without the co-operation of the tenants, expensive improvements like enclosures were simply not financially possible.

Again, in many parts of the Highlands day labour was difficult

if not impossible to get ; hence, if the farmer would not help in the actual work of building dykes and drains, the latter must remain unmade.

Undoubtedly many Highland owners laid themselves open to the charge of trying to shift too much of the initial burden of the semi-permanent improvements on to the shoulders of their tenants. In the Lowlands the expense of improvements of this kind were mostly borne by the proprietors, but it must be remembered that this outlay was in the nature of a reasonably secure investment, for they had the co-operation of tenants with respectable working capitals, who could be counted upon to make the most of the improved farms.

Above all, it must be recalled that reforms on a large scale in the Lowlands were almost invariably accompanied by the union of farms, the creation of a new class of substantial tenantry and the degradation of the small farmers to the rank of cottager. Many of the best known improvers like Sir John Sinclair thought that such a change was inevitable if any solid advance was to be made. If the Highland proprietors had universally adopted this system, undoubtedly farming would have progressed much more rapidly than it did. The Highland districts which compared most favourably with the Lowlands were those like Kintyre and Islay, where not only were geographical conditions most favourable, but where the Lowland example of big farms with substantial tenants (often of Lowland blood) had been followed most extensively.

From a purely farming point of view the results of such a policy were excellent. But such a policy universally applied in the Highlands could only have solved the problems of poverty and over-population in a manner similar to the introduction of sheep farming. Poverty would have been cured by the emigration of the existing tenants, and the substitution of a new type of farmer more fitted economically and, perhaps, temperamentally for his particular work. But it was this probable effect on his tenants which had caused many landlords to refrain deliberately from turning their estates into sheep runs ; the same reasons prevented them from taking the shortest and most sensational method of improving the level of Highland farming.

The position of a would-be-improving Highland landlord who felt strongly about depopulation was difficult in the extreme. He had to struggle along against the obstacles created by the conservatism and the poverty of the small tenants. He had not

much money to spend on risky investments. He had no reason for feeling confident that Lowland methods would work when applied under such difficult conditions and with such a different tenantry. As a final discouragement, he had to allow for not only the conservatism, but the active destructiveness of the small Highland farmers.

The Lovat Papers gave a description of the efforts of the Forfeited Estates Commissioners to carry out a large scheme of afforestation in the Highlands, and showed how their plans were hampered by the tenants who kept peeling off the barks of the young oaks.¹ But the following passage from Macdonald gives the best description of what the improving Hebridian owner had to contend with :

'The man who builds inclosures or constructs gates in the Hebrides must always bear in mind the nature, not only of the climate and soil and other circumstances of a similar description, but also of the people and the animals which they possess. These are more difficult to manage than those of any other portion of Scotland. The people, one would be tempted to imagine on a superficial glance, take pleasure in mischief, and find a peculiar delight in destroying everything which conduces to human comfort. They throw down stones from the battlements of bridges, they fill up wells or drains, they deface milestones, break the windows of churches, of other public buildings, they leap over hedges, dykes and ditches, cut down the banks of rivers, and alter their course for inundating the adjacent fields, and all this with the utmost *gaieté de cœur*, and without the slightest notion of its being taken ill, or the idea that any malicious construction can be put upon their amusement. . . .

Nor is this strange tendency confined to what we call (perhaps Hibernically) the *rational* animals of this country. The horses and cows and sheep are universally of a similar disposition. The same inclosure that suffices for protecting the rich meadows of Suffolk and Essex would be no more heeded by an Hebridian beast, not even by the smallest cow, than if it consisted of the mist of the mountain. . . .

The *sangfroid* with which an Hebridian pulls down a dyke for a passage to himself and his cattle (and without dreaming of rebuilding the gap) is to a stranger most ludicrously provoking. The scene is sometime acted before a gentleman's door, and he himself an indignant witness. The Hebridian is surprised at

¹ See also Marshall, *Central Highlands*; O.S.A. Rogart (Sutherland).

his rage, and tells him that he meant no harm by taking the nearest road home with his horse ! He perhaps adds in the same strain, ' And as for the grass, you need not mind it, Sir, it will grow again.' ' ¹

Given such a tenantry, a certain amount of caution on the landlord's part in spending money on improvements does not seem entirely unnatural.

But there is another question. Suppose that none of these obstacles had existed, and the landlords had gone on rapidly in the path of improving, draining, planting, enclosing, etc., how far would this action have done anything to relieve the situation of the Highland population ?

Most of the permanent or semi-permanent improvements created some initial demand for additional labour. That indefatigable improver, Campbell of Shawfield, employed at first a hundred labourers all the year round. This might have lasted for some time, and it was possible that there might have been a certain permanent increase in the number of day labourers required to keep farms and drains in repair.

On the other hand, the new methods of cultivation generally meant that in the long run the amount of employment was decreased. Such, at least, was the Lowland experience. With enclosures the need for herds must vanish ; with the new improved ploughs much of the old agricultural labour must become superfluous. This last is obvious if we consider how ploughing was done in the eighteenth century Hebrides. When a piece of grass sward was turned up, two men went first with an implement called a *ristle*, made necessary by the ineffectiveness of the Hebridian plough. They were followed by a cavalcade of four horses drawing the plough proper, and accompanied generally by three more men. In other words, it took five men and five horses to do what one man and one horse would do under the new system.

Undoubtedly anything done to improve the old cattle farms was likely to raise the standard of comfort among the farmers, but it would not provide work for the rapidly increasing population. At best, all it could do was to make necessary a certain limited number of additional day labourers, as in the case of Islay.

That in itself was all to the good. A day labourer in the Highlands, as we have said before, could often live more

¹ Macdonald, *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides*, 1811.

prosperously and comfortably than the tenants with minute possessions.¹ There appeared to be during this period a serious shortage of day labour both on the Hebrides and on the mainland, and when we read the demands made for it, it is difficult at first to see why a great part of the practically unemployed Highland population could not have been profitably occupied in that way, at least while the improving era lasted. Anywhere but in the Highlands, it would seem a contradiction in terms to say that a shortage of day labourers and an excess of population existed side by side, but such appeared to be the fact.

The situation is explained by the psychological phenomenon which we have mentioned before. We quote from four independent witnesses, two of whom had spent their lives in the Highlands as parish ministers, the others being close and interested observers of Highland conditions :

‘The genius of the people is more inclined to martial enterprise than to the painful industry and laborious exertion requisite to carry on the art of civil life. Till of late it was even with reluctance that they would live as day labourers ; and still the greater number of those employed in this way are brought from other countries.’²

‘The people seem to be more inclined to idleness than to industry. They are extremely frugal of the little they have, but as to earning anything more, it is a melancholy fact, that a poor tenant, who rents land only to the value of twenty shillings or thirty shillings, and whose labour could well be spared from his little farm many days in the year, will rather saunter or sit idle at home than work for sixpence a day, which would be a considerable addition to his own and his family’s scanty meal.’³

‘Day labourers are unknown on the Highland farms ; though about the castles of chieftains and men of fortune they are found in sufficient abundance ; and, in the Lowlands, they will do the meanest of drudgery for the meanest tenants ; yet, cannot brook the idea of working for their neighbors ; they will rather loiter away the winter in idleness, and starve on the pittance they have saved in their summer’s excursion.’⁴

‘They (the subtenants) often prefer having their children about them in the most miserable state imaginable, to the hardships (or what they are pleased to call such) of driving them into

¹ See *O.S.A. Rogart* (Sutherland) ; *Kiltearn* (Ross).

² *O.S.A. Kingussie and Inch, Inverness*, 1795.

³ *O.S.A. Rogart* (Sutherland).

⁴ Marshall, *Central Highlands*.

service, either on their own island or anywhere else. It is a common sight, on entering the cottage of one of those subtenants, to find five or six grown-up individuals, half-naked and savage looking, around a peat fire watching a pot of potatoes (their sole food for nine months of the year), without any idea or wish of changing their manner of life ; and on being demanded to work for hire, asking the most extravagant wages, or determined to remain as you found them.’¹

These quotations make the attitude of the average Highlander towards ordinary day labour sufficiently clear. No doubt this point of view was gradually being modified, especially in districts that bordered on the Lowlands, but it was undoubtedly still strong enough in 1811 to be a factor that had to be seriously considered. So long as the Highland people felt as described, it was useless for anyone to suggest that the landlords could solve the Highland problem by increasing the demand for day labourers.

However zealously the owners adopted all the suggestions regarding tenure and better farming methods, he was always liable, at last, to come up against a blank wall. By the policy proposed, he could and did raise the standard of life amongst a limited number of people, but he could not, by means of it, provide acceptable occupations for all the persons who continued to make their headquarters upon his estate. The fact had to be faced that what they wanted was not work but land.

The only conceivable solution, then, of the Highland problem which was at the same time open to the landowners and desired by the people, was to plant the unoccupied persons upon the waste lands. True, this might not be possible for the individual proprietor ; he might possess none ; but it might be put forward as a solution of the problem as a whole, subject to the assertion that there were a considerable number of Highlanders who thought that there was nothing to choose between migrating to another district and leaving the country altogether.

Ignoring this last complication, we can start with the fact that at the end of the eighteenth century the Highlands possessed a certain area of reclaimable land.

Macdonald estimated that in 1811 there were something like 300,000 acres of waste in the Hebrides alone ; of these, 120,000 were mountain and 80,000 were pure bog, but the remaining 100,000 of mossy or heathy moor he thought were capable of becoming agricultural land if properly drained and limed.

¹ Macdonald, *The Hebrides*, 1811.

On the north and west coast of the mainland, the proportion available for improvement was not so high, for the mountains came very close to the water line, and in the interior the climatic conditions raised more serious difficulties than in the islands; still there did exist here and there straths which had not hitherto been fully utilised.

A landlord who approached the subject of reclamation from the purely economic standpoint would have several things to consider. First, was the whole thing likely to be worth while? Would the land, which had no doubt already served some purpose as rough pasture, really produce any crops likely to give a sufficient return for the labour and money spent in reclaiming it. Secondly, if the reclaiming was to be done, what was the most economical method of doing it? Conceivably it might be done by the landlord himself undertaking the work and employing the labour; it might be done by getting the tenants of any large farms which adjoined the waste to reclaim some part as one of the conditions in their leases; it might be done by allowing crofters to take up some acres and bring them into cultivation by their own labour. In the case of very wet lands the second and third methods would hardly be possible without a considerable amount of co-operation by the owner.

Whichever one of these three methods was adopted, some additional work would be given to the inhabitants. But if the main purpose of the landowner was a humanitarian rather than an economic one, he would naturally choose the third plan as the one that appealed most to the people he was trying to help. Even from a purely economic point of view some owners preferred the crofter system. Lord Kames, for example, when he set himself to consider the case of reclaiming Kincardine Moss, found that to do the work entirely by himself would involve a prohibitive expense, and would compel him to charge a rent subsequently of from twelve to fifteen pounds an acre, if the operation was to be a commercial success and repay the outlay.

The policy of reclaiming the waste was eagerly urged upon the landlords by Macdonald and other writers, on the ground that it would supply the nation with more food (a strong argument in the early years of the nineteenth century); that it would provide a satisfactory method of disposing of the surplus population, and might even allow the landlords to enlarge the existing grazing farms to a size that would lend themselves better to the sort of improvements already described. The country as a whole, the

existing tenantry and the landlords, were all to benefit by the proposed changes.

Many landlords did take up the policy of reclamations, some mainly from the idea of making the most profitable use of their estates, others with the problem of over-population specially in mind.

The earliest and most conspicuous reclamation on a large scale within the Highland area was Kincardine Moss. This Moss was situated in the Monteith district of Perthshire between the Forth and the Teith, and extended to something like 2000 acres, of which 1500 were on the Blair Drummond Estate of Lord Kames. When Lord Kames took possession of his estate in 1766, his plan was to reclaim the Moss by a huge scheme of irrigation, the moss to be floated off, revealing the good soil underneath. The expense deterred him from doing it quite as originally planned; and the ultimate reclamation was the result of the joint efforts of Kames and his irrigation works and the crofters whom he got to co-operate with him. When Kames first projected his scheme it met with no enthusiasm from the surrounding farmers, and finally nine-tenths of the crofters were brought from the parishes of Callander and Balquhidder, from which they had been displaced by the development of sheep farming. By 1790 most of the Moss was in occupation.

The agreement with the tenant was on the following lines. He was given eight acres of moss for a lease of thirty-eight years. He was allowed a share of the water power for floating off the moss. He was allowed timber sufficient to build a house; and two bolls of meal to support him while building it. In return he paid:

For the first seven years—no rent.	
For the eighth year	—1 mark Scots.
For the ninth year	—2 marks Scots.
By the nineteenth year	—19 marks Scots.

Then twelve shillings for each cleared acre, and half-a-crown for each acre unclaimed.

Once the scheme was well started there appeared plenty of Highlanders willing to carry on the reclamation on these terms.

Other estates took up the general idea and adapted it to local circumstances. Reclaiming with a view to giving employment was carried on at Strachur, in Islay, and in different parts of the Hebrides. Sheriff-Substitute Brown, who was a very cordial advocate of the crofters, described how, in the Central High-

lands, some comparatively high waste land had been brought into cultivation by means of them. As evidence of the general success of the crofting system, he stated that many owners who had turned most of their estates into sheep runs had by 1806 begun to reconsider matters, and had broken up some of the great sheep runs into small crofts.

The policy of reclamation was also taken up by various Sutherland proprietors. Dempster of Dunnichen, at all times a warm believer in small farms, was one of the pioneers upon his estate at Criech. The arrangement there was, that crofters might reclaim all the waste they could in return for an annual payment of one shilling during the crofter's life-time. When the crofter died, his heirs had the option of taking over the holding at a rent to be fixed by arbiters chosen by the landlord and the heirs. The rent so paid was to remain unchanged during the new possessor's life-time and to be similarly revised at his death. Crofters were also given enough seed corn and building materials to help them to make a start. The part of the waste that remained unoccupied could be used as common pasture by all the tenants, unless it was specially enclosed by the owner for the purpose of making plantations.

In the course of the first twenty years of the nineteenth century a similar system was in progress on the Sutherland estates of the Marquis of Stafford and Lord Reay. In these cases the development of the crofting system on the flat areas beside the shore was carried on simultaneously with the extensive development of sheep farming on the high lands in the interior. The earliest crofters were small cattle farmers who had been transferred.

In the face of these facts, it cannot be alleged that the Highland landlords ignored the possibilities of reclaiming, though from the statements of Macdonald in 1811, it is evident that the process was still capable of being carried a good deal further so far as the Hebrides were concerned. Where the crofting system was started, it appeared to have been welcomed by the inhabitants, and to have provided a considerable additional population with the means of support. Sheriff-Substitute Brown mentioned that about 1770 there had been on the eastern side of the Long Island, a district that was mainly waste, only some ten families; at the time he was writing, that is in 1806, the same area supported a population of nine hundred souls.

Undoubtedly the crofting system of reclamation helped to solve some of the immediate Highland difficulties, but whether,

from a broad point of view, it was a success was a matter of much controversy at the time and later.

Some contemporaries were enthusiastic about the results. Brown, writing in 1806, spoke in glowing terms of the contentment and comfort amongst the crofters who had come under his observation. The following quotation from an article in the *Farmers' Magazine* on the Sutherland crofters corroborates Brown's view :

'Services and payments in kind have been abolished ; in lieu of which, fixed money rents, on a moderate scale, have been substituted. To every cottage is attached a quantity of land at least sufficient for the maintenance of a cow ; but in most cases, every cottager has been allotted to him from two to three Scotch acres, capable of cultivation, with a proportional quantity of hill pasture. The new settlers have adopted every improvement in agriculture which their limited means will permit. The improvements which they have commenced, and which are now in progress by bringing into cultivation considerable portions of waste land, may be said to be astonishing ; and the exertions they have made since their industry has received a proper direction, and has been confined within proper limits, adapted to their respective means, give them a character totally different from that which formerly distinguished them. As they have increased in industry, so have they increased in the knowledge and the desire to possess those comforts which their circumstances can afford. Their turf hovels, after having, in the first instance, given place to cottages built of rough stones, without mortar, are, by degrees, changed into neat houses constructed of stone and lime. A greater attention to cleanliness commences to be an object ; and the cow and the pig begin no longer to inhabit the same dwelling with the family.'¹

As against such comparatively favourable descriptions, we have to put the vigorous attacks made on the crofting system from two very different quarters.

To some extent the creation of crofts of the type described went on simultaneously with the spread of sheep farming, and was intended as a provision for the displaced farmers. In such cases the crofters were given portions of waste land, generally small, and were concentrated in villages convenient for additional sources of livelihood like fishing and kelp-making. It was this aspect of crofting which attracted the attention of some writers

¹ *Farmers' Magazine*, February 1816.

and led to their vigorous denunciations. It was obviously not the work of reclaiming to which such authors¹ objected; they were men deeply and very genuinely moved by the distress of the Highland people, and by the wrongs which they believed the latter had suffered at the hands of brutal and oppressive land-owners, and they were inclined to see sinister motives in any changes proposed by the proprietors. The objections they made to crofting were its association with sheep farming; the compulsory transfer of the small tenants to new homes; the insufficient quantity of land provided; the exorbitant rents charged for it; and the wretchedness often existing amongst the crofters, which they compared unfavourably with the state of comfort previously enjoyed by the small cattle farmers.

The second group of critics, of whom one might select as types Sir George Mackenzie² and Dr. Macculloch,³ approached the whole subject from an entirely different point of view. They started from a much more friendly attitude toward the land-owners, and their main preoccupation was how to make the best use of the land rather than how to make the situation of the majority of the local population more comfortable. Much of their criticism of crofting is purely economic, and is closely connected with the general dislike of the eighteenth-century improver for the small farm. They considered that crofting was an uneconomic method of reclaiming land, and that the results of the work of the crofters were very small in proportion to the vast expenditure of labour. Such criticisms, though they may have served to discourage some proprietors at the time, would not necessarily have detracted from the social value of the crofts. More serious was the fact that neither Macculloch nor Mackenzie thought that the system held out any hopes for the crofters themselves. Mackenzie thought that its weak spot was that, by confining a man permanently to a few acres, it offered no reasonable incentive to ambition, and gave the Highlander no chance of seriously improving his lot. Macculloch, touring

¹ *Sketches of the Character, Manners and Present State of the Highlanders*, Col. David Stewart, 1822.

A Critical Examination of Dr. Macculloch's Work on the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland, Anon. 1826.

² *General View of the Agriculture of Ross and Cromarty*, Sir George Mackenzie, Bart., 1811.

³ *A Description of the Western Highlands of Scotland*, Dr. John Macculloch, 1819.

the Hebrides in 1819, thought that the generally deplorable condition of the crofters was a sufficient commentary on the drawbacks of the system.

Both groups of critics could bring a considerable amount of evidence in support of their views. Crofting was in many cases accompanied by injustice and oppression on the part of owners, and used by some as a fresh means of extortion, but the opponents of the change overlooked certain fundamental facts.

It will be evident from all that has been said, that writers like Colonel Stewart took an impossibly sentimental view of the previous situation of the crofter. At worst he was exchanging one life of poverty and hardship for another.

Again, as regards the insufficient size of the crofts, though there was justice in the charge, the situation arose partly from a real shortage of land and partly from the difficulty of preventing the tenants from subdividing their crofts. Those landlords who refused to allow such subdivision laid themselves open to a charge of brutality, since they virtually compelled some emigration; those who allowed it were blamed for the consequent state of wretchedness existing on their estates.

At first sight it seems difficult to reconcile the roseate view of crofting taken by Sheriff-Substitute Brown and the writer on the Sutherland improvements, with that taken either by Colonel Stewart or Dr. Macculloch. Though the two latter writers disagreed on most things, they were both emphatic in asserting that the crofters mostly lived a wretched existence.

Their view has some support from other sources. In 1826 a Parliamentary Report¹ on emigration produced sensational evidence as to Highland and Hebridian conditions, including areas where crofting had been tried. In Tiree one half of the population of the island had to live on the bounty of the rest. On Benbecula one-third of the population had no land, while the owner had had to spend nine thousand pounds between 1812 and 1818 simply to keep the people alive. The situation was then relieving itself in the usual way by a fresh outburst of emigration.

The two opposing views as to the value of crofting as a solution for Highland poverty and unemployment are not absolutely impossible to reconcile. The success of crofting depended largely on the existence of favouring circumstances. In the eighteenth century it worked best in those districts where cultivation of the land was not the sole resource of the crofter. On the

¹ *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. iv. 1826-1827.

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Sutherland estates, for example, the crofts planted along the shore did partly achieve their object. It is significant that during the bad years between 1812 and 1818, when most of the Highland areas suffered seriously, the Sutherland family had to distribute twelve thousand pounds to support their inland tenants who were still farming on the old system, but the crofters on the coast weathered the storm with little help. They could fall back in bad seasons on the fisheries.

Similarly, so long as kelp-making remained a profitable industry, which was the case until 1822, the crofters on the Hebrides stood a chance. But by 1822 prices of kelp, which had once ranged as high as ten pounds a ton, had fallen as low as two or three pounds, so that resource could no longer be relied upon.

Even at its best, crofting obviously had decided limits as a method of meeting the Highland difficulties. It was necessarily limited by the amount of waste land capable of intensive cultivation. It was hampered by the difficulty of preventing the Highlanders from subdividing their crofts into such small portions as could not possibly provide subsistence for a family. It is noticeable that on the Sutherland estates subdivision was forbidden. The Highlanders themselves were the chief obstacles to the crofting system being given a fair trial.

As a commentary on this whole discussion, it might be mentioned that in 1837 the Highlands again approached a sensational crisis in destitution. A report was drawn up by Mr. Robert Graham¹ and ordered to be printed by the House of Commons.

The report bore out the view that the destitution was due, not to any special oppression by the owners, either by way of rents, tenures, introduction of sheep or enlargement of farms.

'The evil consists in the want of occupation for the great mass of the population, in any way which will pay in any quarter. In many large districts the small tenants could not live as well upon their present possessions as the poorest labourers in the low country, if they were freed entirely from the burden of rent.'

Certain conclusions regarding Highland distress at this period would seem to emerge from the whole of this investigation.

First, that no manipulation of their estates by the owners could have provided employment for any length of time for all the people who wished to remain there. To maintain decently

¹ Letter from Mr. Robert Graham to Mr. Fox Maule on Highland destitution, 6th May, 1837.

even the existing population, leaving out of account the natural increase, subsidiary occupations of some sort were necessary—fisheries, kelp-making, canal building, manufactures, etc.—and the early nineteenth century saw these sources of employment diminished, not increased. The withdrawal of the fishing bounties, the abandonment of the protection to kelp, the revolution in the textile industries and their concentration in coal areas, were all aggravating factors in Highland distress.

Secondly, it must be admitted that those Highlanders who succeeded in their ambition of getting and retaining a small piece of land, were unlikely, even under a favourable system of tenure, to reach a comfortable standard of living. It is true that modern experience has shown that there are many more possibilities in the small farm than were dreamed of by the eighteenth-century improver. But where small farming in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been a success it has been associated with certain conditions.

(*a*) More natural advantages than were to be found in the Highlands. (*b*) Good market facilities and some co-operative system of marketing. (*c*) Intensive cultivation. (*d*) A considerable amount of capital supplied by way of Land Banks and Credit Societies.

Of these conditions of success, not one was present in the Highlands or Hebrides.

What the eighteenth-century Highlands wanted was not a patriarchal chief, but an eighteenth-century Raiffeisen or Sir Horace Plunkett.

MARGARET I. ADAM.