

## 1. An Emotive and Political Thing.

‘These people typify a breed of greedy, grasping nuisances who contribute nothing to society and who usually exert a positively malign influence on the communities they inflict themselves on’.

THE LAND question in the Highlands commands as much significance and interest in Scotland today as at any time in the past. What is the reason for this continuing significance and interest?

Developments during the 1970s and 1980s may help explain. In these years, much public attention focussed in particular on the concentration of ownership of great stretches of the Highlands, the operation of the game laws with regard to deer and salmon, and the often-grotesque speculation in landed estates.

As far back as the mid-1970s, John MacEwen was publishing material in respect of this concentration of ownership.

‘One hundred and forty individuals or companies own just under half the Highlands. Four individuals own just under half a million acres. Seventeen individuals or companies own sixty-nine per cent of the land of Caithness. Thirty-eight own eighty-four per cent of the land of Sutherland. Eighty own fifty-seven per cent of Inverness-shire; sixty-seven own eighty per cent of the land of Argyll; seventy-six own eighty per cent of the land of Ross and Cromarty; and sixty-three own sixty-two per cent of the land of Perthshire’.

And in the early 1980s a report on land ownership and use in the Highlands and Islands identified aged and absentee landlords as a major factor in the under-utilisation of land in the area. It added that the popular image of the absentee Highland landlord as the

product of an English public school, followed by perhaps Oxbridge or the Services, was accurate. About half of the landowners in the north of Scotland could be regarded as absentee. Of those of who were listed in Who's Who, more than two-thirds had attended public schools - and of the forty-six who had attended university, Oxford was almost the exclusive choice. Many landowners had a background which included some military training and almost one-third still retained their military titles. No less than half of the estates which had had titled owners a full century earlier remained in the possession of the same family.

An opinion poll conducted shortly afterwards showed that seventy-seven per cent of Scots were in favour of some form of control over the amount of land that could be privately owned in the country. No less than sixty-three per cent of the respondents favoured limitations on the amount of land that could be owned by any single individual, and fifty-eight per cent felt that there should be control over how much land was owned by any company or institution. A similar percentage wanted controls on land ownership by anyone who was not Scottish by nationality, while sixty-eight per cent also thought it 'very important' that remote communities should survive in Scotland.

These revelations, and their implications, did not go unnoticed. Some years earlier, indeed, the Western Isles Council had announced that a land-register delineating the possessions of the principal landowners in the islands was to be compiled. And shortly afterwards the council's crofting committee was calling for unused and under-used land to be transferred to public ownership. A year later the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) launched its 'comprehensive strategy' for agriculture and land use in

the Highlands, which strategy was to include compulsory powers of land acquisition. These powers, however, would be no more than a 'final string to the bow', as ownership of land was an 'emotive, political thing'.

Just how emotive - and political - this final string was, would soon be apparent. By the following Christmas, the MP for the Western Isles was asking in the House of Commons whether the government was 'aware that there is great disappointment in the Highlands' that the HIDB had never used its existing powers with regard to land. The Highlands 'requires legislation to wipe-out the curse of landlordism once and for all'. The appropriate Conservative minister replied that 'with this sort of socialism' he disagreed 'totally'.

Given this sort of lead from its political masters, the Board was quick to back-off from the emotive and political thing. At the 1983 conference of the Scottish Landowners' Federation speakers, including Keith Schellenberg and Lord Burton, took very strong exception to any HIDB plan to take a leading role in land ownership.

The assembled landowners were also addressed by the HIDB's chairman. Mixing metaphors with some Žlan, he noted that the land question was 'one of the hottest potatoes on the Board's table, on which I don't want to get drawn into too much debate because I'm sure I'll put my foot in it'. He then announced that he did not subscribe to the view that changing the system of land-ownership would solve the problem. The conference chairman promptly congratulated the Board on 'breeding' a new kind of chairman: practical and down-to-earth, rather than the impractical ideologue-type of the past.

And the clout of the landlords was not confined to government and its development agencies. They also exerted a remarkably dominant influence with regard to forestry policy, against the background of a debate on the extent to which trees might constitute a worthwhile agricultural crop in an era of European food surpluses. The controlling principle of this influence was tax-break schemes for the very rich.

In the 1980s, prevailing forestry schemes were criticised by, among others, the North East Mountain Trust, which claimed that many of the schemes were 'barely competent'. Of some proposed plantations, the trust added that it was 'difficult to avoid the conclusion that they are simply thinly disguised deer shelters financed, in considerable measure, out of the public purse'.

One calculation put it like this. 'The gross cost of afforestation work before tax relief of grants is up to £1,000 per hectare spread over the first six years. Of this £1,000 per hectare, the Forestry Commission gives a grant of £240. The rest, £760, is your business loss for the year, and under tax schedule D you can claim it against tax which you are paying at 60 per cent. This means that sixty per cent of the £760 comes back as tax relief, which means that something like seventy per cent of the total cost - excluding the price of the land - is paid for by the taxpayer. After a relatively small number of years - perhaps ten - the investor can then sell to an institutional purchaser like a pension fund, who have no tax incentives to plant bare land, but are prepared to buy plantation land to invest in the physical growth of the crop and the inflation of land and crop values. The investor can sell at £1,000 a hectare, which means that he gets back £1,000 on land for which he originally paid about £300'.

These and similar entrepreneurial efforts did not go un-noticed or uncriticised, although the criticism was something that at least some landlords affected not to understand.

For those landlords, the problem was one of image. At the 1981 conference of the Scottish Landowners' Federation, one speaker suggested that it was 'particularly important during the current recession, when people are being asked to make real sacrifices, that the lairds make a greater effort to dispel their image of champagne-swilling and pouring whisky down their throats and doing very little for it': for the truth was entirely to the contrary.

According to the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensferry (whose great-grandfather had been the federation's first-ever president in 1906), 'We have been far too reticent over the years in letting it be known that we are doing a helluva good job. I think we should be flying the flag a bit more'.

On crofters, however, the landlords have expressed less fulsome sympathy. During the parliamentary debates in the mid-1970s on the reform of crofting law, Lord Burton - a member, it might be thought, of one of the world's smallest and most pampered minorities - was attacking crofters from his seat in the House of Lords. 'There was no reason why crofters, a small section of the community, should be pampered'. Burton also asked of his peers why a crofter should receive 'enormous' privileges in grants and subsidies while at the same time paying 'tiny' rents.

In that same debate, Lord Thurso nostalgically regretted that, 'no longer would they see a peasant form of existence, with crofters scraping a living from a few rough acres'. And Lord Balfour, owner of 105 crofts in Sutherland, complained that, 'some rents have been

fixed in 1888 and [were] unchanged because landlords were sympathetic to the difficulties and struggles of crofters’.

The precise nature of this sort of sympathy was evident a few years later in Caithness, when some employees of the Langwell and Braemore estate were bold enough to approach their MP, with regard to the management style of the estate. Langwell was then in the possession of one Lady Anne Cavendish Bentinck, possessor of a personal fortune worth an estimated £50 million. (It had come from her father, the Duke of Portland, otherwise known as ‘Chopper’, according to his obituarist in the Daily Telegraph, on account of his prowess in the woodworking shop at Eton).

Bentinck reacted to this insubordination most decisively, and wrote in stern terms to her employees’ (elected) MP. He had sent her a letter - she wrote - stating that he had been approached by her employees at Langwell, who felt she might not be aware of what had been decided about their ‘perquisites’. She declared that she was, of course, aware of the decision - ‘I am not a puppet’ - and that there was nothing whatsoever to prevent the employees in question from approaching her personally.

But they had chosen to go behind her back, she said, ‘which to my mind is the height of disloyalty and disloyalty is something which I have never been prepared to tolerate in anyone’. She went on to state her intention of placing Langwell and Braemore on the market without delay, hoping, as she put it, that the employees ‘will find their new employer more generous than they consider I have been. In view of this, I shall not be returning to Caithness, either now or at any future time’.

But it is in the cause of the game laws that the landlord class in the Highlands has been most incorrigible. Even in the 1976

parliamentary debates of crofting reform, the game laws were perceived as central to the matter. Lord Burton, for instance, was so worried that sporting rights could be taken compulsorily from landlords that, 'it would be better to be a tenant than a landlord'. Lord Kirkhill had to reassure the peers that the government, 'had made adequate provision for cases where shooting and fishing rights would be materially affected'.

The same obsession with the protection of private interest in terms of the game laws was also evident in 1982, when the House of Lords debated the Deer (Scotland) Bill - a debate 'remarkable even by parliamentary standards for the naked parading of vested interests'. The central pre-occupation of this private Bill was to penalise poachers further. It was intended to lead to the licensing of venison-dealers and the empowering of police to inspect their records. It would also lead to the tightening-up of the law on night-shooting and out-of-season shooting, these last provisions serving as eloquent testimony to the paranoia of the landlords with regard to deer-poaching. (That is, the unauthorised shooting of the wild beasts that infest the Highlands, that are not owned by anyone in law, but the shooting of which is reserved for the landlord over whose acres they roam).

The names of those who took part in the debate are eloquent testimony too. Viscount Thurso, owner through a family trust of 52,000 acres of Caithness, thought the whole thing would be 'an enormous step forward against the poacher. The higher sentences proposed will really put the skids under the poacher in a way that has not happened since the Deer (Scotland) Act was first enacted'.

A second speaker was Viscount Massereene and Ferrard (19,000 acres of Mull). After Eton, John Clotworthy Talbot Foster

Whyte-Melville Skeffington - as his obituary in the Times records - farmed, raced, shot, and was president of the (very) right-wing Monday Club. He had introduced the 1963 Deer Act into the Lords.

On another occasion his lordship told his peers that unemployment was not as bad as it seemed. He knew this from his own experience, when he had been unable to obtain an undergardener for Chilham Castle. As to proposals for a transport tunnel under the Channel, he hoped, 'that the ventilation arrangements will not stick up a long way above the sea because they would obviously interfere with ships'. Now, he told the Lords, 'poaching has grown appallingly in the last few years. With due respect to crofters and farm tenants, my experience has been that they know very little about deer'.

And down from his castle outside Beaulieu, Lord Lovat (76,000 acres of Inverness-shire) thought it an excellent Bill, but urged its sponsor, Lord Glenarthur, to ensure that night-poaching was made a much more serious offence than it had been before. Serious, of course, because it is relatively easy for someone to shoot at night an out-of-season beast beside a more-or-less remote roadway: although any many who does so for money or food must be judged desperate for one or the other.

In Glenelg, meantime, a seventy-year-old man was threatened with eviction from his tied estate-house because the landlord suspected him of poaching. He was ordered to quit the house in question, along with his family, on New Year's Eve. The tenant involved had lived in the district for over thirty years but the landlord felt 'his generosity abused' when he began to suspect that 'his' deer were being poached.

This particular landlord went to his tenant's house. Though there was no one there at the time, he felt himself justified in searching it, until he found venison in a refrigerator. He did not, however, call on the services of the police. But he did 'feel very sad, very angry about the whole matter. I liked Kenny very dearly for many years, but after this I just couldn't let him stay on'. According to the thirty-five year old amateur detective, whose principal address was given in court as a castle in Warwickshire, the tenant could get a council house in the district: 'People on social security can get houses, so why can't he?'

Similarly, the subject of salmon enormously excites the proprietorial instinct, and in particular the nightmare of poachers acquiring 'their' fish. And in turn, nothing demonstrates better the continuing tradition of antipathy to landlordism in the Highlands than the sport of taking a landlord's fish: for a point, unspoken or not, has always been made by it. It is not a crime so much as a 'moral duty', in the words of a former MP for the Western Isles.

By its nature, salmon-poaching is shy of publicity. But in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a rash of press-reports concerning salmon-related disputes in the inner and Outer Hebrides. Protests were made to Stornoway police as a result of alleged harassment of locals in the Uig area of Lewis. In Skye, four men were fined an extraordinary £800 on charges of poaching the river Snizort: while at the same court a nineteen-year old, unemployed for a year and in receipt of less than £16 a week in benefit, was fined £150. That same month estate-owners on Skye 'declared war' on poachers. Under an obscure law dating from 1862, they planned to establish a district fisheries board which would give them sweeping powers. 'Such a board would be able to appoint water bailiffs, constables

and river watchers, with the power of search and arrest if illegal fishing is suspected’.

At around the same time the chairman of the Northern Joint Police Committee thought it appropriate to condemn his chief constable’s practice of offering private landlords help in arresting poachers. ‘I personally do not think the police should be doing this job’, he said, following reports that a sergeant had been sent under cover to Lewis to assist estate servants in protecting their masters’ fish.

In Lewis, the Loch Roag district salmon fishery board issued a bailiff’s card in the name of a convicted murderer, ‘despite the very substantial powers that go with the office’. In Lewis, three young men, two of them in receipt of £22.50 a week unemployment benefit, were fined £150 each on charges of salmon poaching and contempt of court. In Harris, a doctor swimming in the bay at Amhuinnsuidhe Castle was told that he could not swim there as ‘it was private’, and that if he didn’t get out of the water, ‘he would be shot like a seal’.

And in Harris again, soon afterwards, water bailiffs were witnesses against two local men. ‘Police officers said that when one of them was arrested and charged, he had given his occupation as poacher. In the police vehicle taking him back to Stornoway, he had been singing Gaelic songs, and saying that as soon as he got out he would be back poaching again’. Despite this splendid bravado and despite one of the accused having suffered a broken jaw at the hands of the bailiffs, fines totalling £600 were imposed (on the alleged poachers).

But the most-publicised location for anti-landlord conduct with regard to the game laws during the 1970s and 1980s was the Grimersta estate and river system in the west of Lewis.

One early incident there involved a Stornoway man found not guilty of a charge of breach of the peace outside the under-keeper's house at Grimersta. The court was told that the accused had shouted at the under-keeper, 'Are you the [expletive deleted] Commando?' When asked whether he was often known as the Commando, the under-keeper modestly informed the court, 'No, very often I was referred to as the [expletive deleted] Geordie'. A little later, the legal authorities dropped charges against a Grimersta bailiff who had, armed with a shotgun, approached a 16-year-old youth, knocked him to the ground, and smashed his (legal) angling tackle. The authorities refused to discuss the decision with the press.

In another local poaching case, one of the witnesses for the prosecution was Lord Biddulph, a member of the syndicate which owned the water in question. A second witness, one of Biddulph's bailiffs, told the court of his encounter with the accused. 'There was a lot said. He asked me, 'Why are you working for the English? We have been fishing salmon here for years'. You couldn't even go to a petrol station without someone shouting abuse at you'.

Another report, following a summer of fierce conflict in the district - during which the fishery launch Omsk was deployed - claimed that the quote in question was, 'Why are you working for these English bastards? We have been fishing salmon here for centuries!' The accused was arrested on-shore by the Northern Constabulary's 'poaching liaison officer', who had been staying plain-clothed at various estates in the district incognito, and who had been aboard the Omsk at the time of the incident. The sergeant in question, said the estate afterwards, had been 'exceedingly helpful'. The accused claimed that he was fishing for flat-fish: 'expert

witnesses' told the court that a five-inch gill net was not, however, suitable for a such a purpose.

In another case in the same court, a not-proven verdict on a charge of breach of the peace was returned on a frogman-suited swimmer arrested in the mouth of the river. The sheriff concluded that any state of alarm - the precise nature of the alarm was not specified - among the lodge residents as a result of the frogman's presence had been self-induced.

The following summer there was 'acrimony and violence', with the Stornoway procurator-fiscal ordering the weekend detention of two men arrested on suspicion of poaching. A week later the dispute took a farcical turn, when the chairman of the company owning the Garynahine estate was himself arrested for alleged poaching. Meanwhile, a house and boat belonging to the fiscal (who had been attending a royal garden-party in Edinburgh) were vandalised.

Referring to the alleged need for bailiffs, the chairman in question, a London company director, drew on his extensive knowledge of a phenomenon hitherto undetected by European historiography: the shocking poaching problem in Nazi Germany. 'We are afraid our guests could be attacked by thugs. This is like Nazi Germany in 1934'.

And in the autumn of 1983 the Grimersta fishery manager appeared in court (from custody) on charges including assault and breach of the peace. He denied three charges of the former and two of the latter, as well as a charge of wilfully damaging a van. 'The offences occurred after he had unlawfully stopped the passage of vehicles on the public highway when carrying out his duties as water bailiff for the estate', it was reported. He had been charged with

assaulting one youth by striking him in the face with a truncheon, and another by forcibly removing him from the van and striking him on the face with his fists.

When the court convened the procurator-fiscal announced that several charges already outstanding against the accused had been dropped; but that he would plead guilty to those that remained. For the accused, an Edinburgh advocate offered a lengthy plea in mitigation, to the effect that a high degree of ill-feeling existed in the Grimersta area. 'A constant state of war existed between poachers and the estate, which had led to a long history of violence'. The wife of the accused 'can barely walk through Stornoway without having abuse hurled at her', this advocate earnestly proclaimed.

The sheriff then admonished the accused. It was, no doubt, entirely irrelevant that the sheriff himself came from a wealthy background in Sutherland, had been educated at the universities of Grenoble and Cambridge, and shared membership of Edinburgh's New Club with at least two members of the syndicate that owned Grimersta estate.

The following month, it was revealed that the Lord Advocate had been consulted before it was decided to prosecute the fishery manager. And that revelation had had to be extorted from the authorities by means of a written parliamentary question, to which the Solicitor General for Scotland curtly replied, 'The Lord Advocate was consulted. I have no further statement to make'. Two months later, the same sheriff was again dealing with the 'problem' caused by poachers; and fining two (local) men respectively £550 or ninety days in prison, and £200 or thirty days in prison.

For the full glory of narrow class interest masquerading as the majesty of the law, however, there is no better example than the

parliamentary debates surrounding the passage of the 1986 Salmon Act. Introduced by Lord Gray of Contin, it was one of only three specifically Scottish measures in that parliament. Its principal provision was to force salmon dealers to have a licence and so remove the 'main outlet for illegally-taken salmon'. In a masterly under-statement, the then shadow Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar said that 'it was pathetic that a clamp-down on poaching is the government's main piece of Scottish legislation in the current parliamentary session'.

But its reception in the Lords pressed hard on the boundaries of ecstasy. Of the twenty peers who spoke, at least fifteen had vested interests as the owners of salmon fishings. Lord Burton made no less than twenty-two contributions, and commented, 'How nice it would be if in future one could say, look how good our fishings are, thanks to the Bill that Lord Gray introduced in 1986'. In October of that year, the Bill finished its passage through parliament and its provisions became law the following month.

Above all, however, it was the abuses of ownership of immense stretches of the Highlands which drew most critical comment on landlordism during the 1970s and 1980s.

Affairs on the island of Raasay were brought to national attention in the early 1970s, following the refusal of one Dr. John Green - who scarcely ever visited the island - to allow a sliver of his land to be used for a much-needed pier to service a ferry to Skye. In 1961, the Department of Agriculture had offered for sale to the highest bidder ten and a half acres of the island, along with Raasay House Hotel and various other properties. Green got the lot for £4,000 - with time to pay. Raasay House, in which Boswell and Johnson had dined so richly in 1773, was allowed to fall into ruins.

When plans were launched for a very modest ferry, on which HIDB proposals for the island rested, Green blocked them.

Subsequently, the Secretary of State for Scotland confirmed Inverness County Council's compulsory purchase of a small area of land to serve as a ferry terminal. Dr. Green had objected to this at the outset, forcing an enquiry. And on a decision being reached which was unfavourable to him, he announced that he would appeal to the Court of Session. In the Commons, meantime, the local MP had forced an adjournment debate on the issue, noting, 'Nothing in nine years experience of representing the constituency of Inverness remotely compares with the bitter frustration I have had in trying to get something done on the island of Raasay'. Dr. Green's actions, he thought, had been 'evasive, delaying or downright obstructive of anything proposed for the island's benefit'.

The row is recalled in the words of a song in the celebrated stage play the Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil:

'Dr. Green of Surrey  
Is in no hurry  
For a ferry to cross the Sound.  
You want a pier?  
Oh no, not here -  
I need that patch of ground.  
This island she  
Belongs to me  
As all you peasants know -  
And I'm quite merry  
For I need no ferry  
As I never intend to go'.

A second row concerned a proposal to build with public funds a bypass round Amhuinnsuidhe Castle on the western side of Harris. The house and 62,000 acres of associated land had been bought in the 1960s by Sir Hereward Wake, who objected to the very occasional car to be found on the public road which passed in front of the castle. Both Wake and the chairman of the roads committee of Inverness-shire County Council, Lord Burton, had been at Eton. The council decided to spend £40,000 on a bypass: a decision which occasioned a huge uproar, and forced the council to reverse its decision. Another outcry followed Wake's attempt to sell his castle and estate in 1975 to a syndicate of Americans. After just nine years of ownership, he was asking for the estate three times what he had paid for it.

A brochure issued by the selling-agents - Period Houses of Wisconsin Avenue, Washington - announced a plan to convert North Harris into a 'vacation haven and a sporting retreat for investors': and a 'good profit' was also assured. The main residential property on the estate was Amhuinnsuidhe Castle, a Victorian mock-castle built in 1867 for the Earl of Dunmore: but the syndicate was intending to increase the accommodation potential by the construction of 'other castles'.

For a rateable value of less than £800, the investors were to get 35,000 acres of deer-forest, 22,000 acres of common pasture, and 4,500 acres under crofting tenancy, along with 174 registered crofts. According the selling-agents the estate was particularly attractive because 'it is remote and uncontaminated, so rich in unpolluted natural resources that they have never been overused. We mean to keep it that way indefinitely'.

In the event, the estate went elsewhere; though exactly where elsewhere was not immediately known. As one commentator observed: 'Sixty-two thousand acres of North Harris have now been sold. The vendor is an obscure Northamptonshire squire and the buyer is an anonymous continental. An Edinburgh estate-agent protects the secrecy of the client's identity. The people have no right in law to know who owns the land they walk and work. In due course they may discover which parasite upon society has bought the right to call himself their landlord. These people typify a breed of greedy, grasping nuisances who contribute nothing to society and who usually exert a positively malign influence on the communities that they inflict themselves on'.

Around the same time, Skye was the centre of attention, with the Strollamus estate on the market. Comprising 2,000 acres and a 'fine, old stone-built' house, the property had been bought only seven years earlier for £1,600 - but, as the owner announced, 'I have never lost on a deal involving land'.

The following year, 1976, was a brisk one for similar speculation in Highland landed estates. In January a planning application to build a holiday village in Torridon revealed that for some months past the greater part of the Ben Damph estate's 18,000 acres had been in the ownership of a consortium of Dutch businessmen. They were hoping to build holiday chalets over 200 acres of a designated area of great landscape value, as well as a proposed national park.

A month later it was revealed that an investment fund manager had a twenty-year lease - at a cost of £3.70 a week - on Skye's Glendale estate. This lease involved the year-round tenancy of a twelve-room lodge, its one-acre walled garden, wooded policies,

20,000 acres of rough shooting, exclusive trout fishing on a hill loch and free salmon-fishing on the Hamera river. Naturally, free exterior maintenance of the lodge was required too, from local crofters. That May the three Lewis villages of Valtos, Reef and Kneep were for sale too - along with the rest of their 20,000-acre crofting estate, for £45,000, through a company registered in the Isle of Man.

In August, public attention focussed on an attempt to take out of crofting legislation part of Skye's Strathaird estate, at the bidding of its owner, a 36-year-old Londoner. Britain's second-richest property dealer, this Londoner had purchased Strathaird's 15,000 acres in 1973 for £720,000, had visited the estate once, and had since auctioned-off the contents of its lodge.

The following month, the Dutch owners of the Ben Damph estate in Torridon let it be known that their project there was 'no more than a foothold in the Scottish market', and that they were 'already seeking further sites for development'. In November, ownership of the Uig estate on Lewis was being transferred to Isle of Man companies by one Timothy Proctor of Holland Park and Belgravia. And as the year drew to a close, there were complaints about the 'appalling record' of absentee landlords at Inverinate in wester Ross.

A year later, Skye's Horace Martin was offering for sale house-sites, at a cost of £6,000 per acre, on land that he had bought nine years earlier at a cost of 50 pence per acre. And in Lewis the Uig estate was to be broken up into patches of three-fifths of an acre each, at a cost per patch of \$100, though each buyer was also promised an 'elaborate vellum scroll', proving title to this 'heritage': while the 30,000-acre Morsgail estate was being offered for sale through the London estate-agents of Savills for around £750,000.

Further publicity followed the proposed sale of the island of Eriskay's 1,740 acres, home to a population of 181 people. South Uist Estates, owners of the island, comprised a syndicate of nine families headed by Colonel David Greig, and had acquired the property in 1960 from the merchant banker Herbert Anton Andrae. The selling-agents Knight, Frank and Rutley described the island as an 'exceptional property: we expect a great deal of interest, not only in the United Kingdom but from abroad as well'. The asking price, it was reported, was upwards of £250,000.

Not long afterwards, ten-day shooting holidays were on offer from the South Uist and Garynahine, Lewis, estates, in a joint package costing £2,500 per person. Johannes Hellinga (a Dutch speculator who had been heavily involved in buying and selling parts of Skye) was in gaol on charges of currency forgery. Conservationists and the armed forces were squabbling over the sale of the Knoydart estate.

And on Skye the Dutchman Jannes Wolthuis, who had bought the Fasach part of the Waternish estate from his gaoled countryman, was offering it for sale to local crofters - for a sum of £385,000, or four times its estimated actual market value. Five months later, Wolthuis' company, Intrad Developments, was seeking planning permission to 'develop' Fasach, while the local district councillor observed: 'We all know about the rape of the Waternish peninsula. It is a disgrace, but these are the laws of the land'.

The Dutchman's offer was equivalent to £650 an acre, when prime farmland in Perthshire was selling at £500 an acre (though this might not have been entirely surprising, in an estate of which parts had been bought and sold five times in four years following Hellinga' acquisition of it in 1978).

On the mainland, meantime, the owner of the Inverinate estate in Lochalsh was attempting to curb local rights of way. Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, defence minister of the United Arab Emirates, denied, however, that there had been any concerted attempt to thwart public access to a beauty spot in the ownership of the National Trust for Scotland. And at much the same time, the uninhabited island of Scarp off the west coast of Harris was being improved too - by its owner, Nazmu Virani, a former Ugandan Asian and owner of a string of hotels. Virani, it transpired, had acquired the 'freehold' of the 2,200 acre islet, and was planning to build 'a few residential units in the quarter-million to half-million range'.

Virani claimed to know that the island was entirely under crofting tenure, and added that he had already 'bought-out' some of the crofters involved. A spokesman for the Crofters' Commission said that this transfer of responsibility was 'news' to him and added, with commendable restraint, that 'in any case things aren't that simple with land in crofting tenure'.

And so it went on. By 1990, the heiress to the Sears fortune had bought herself 19,000 acres of the Highlands for £2.5 million. The Mar Lodge estate near Balmoral had gone for £7 million to a woman described as an American society hostess - which may, or may not, be the least inelegant description of a one-time pornographic 'model'. Nearly 30,000 acres of the Lovat estates, along with a stretch of the salmon-rich Beaully river, had gone to a timeshare property-development company. And in Ross-shire, a stalker at Kinlochewe had been in dispute with the wealthy southern owners of the estate.

The stalker had been sacked after falling out with Cathy Whitbread over window-panes that she had demanded be installed

in her dog-kennels. Part of an out-of-court settlement was that the stalker would be re-housed. Speaking from her principal residence in Suffolk, the brewer-woman said, 'The house in Gairloch is only 20 miles away, so it's not really far. I think we are being perfectly reasonable. Mr. MacLellan was very rude to me'.

And by 1990 Scotland continued to be home to the most concentrated pattern of private land-ownership in Europe, with half of the country owned by less than 600 people, and an élite thirteen owning ten per cent of it. As the Sunday Times reported in July of that year, 'The sporting estates of Scotland continue to defy almost every other sector of the property market with rising prices and continuing demand. Sporting estates have risen consistently in value since the early 1970s, as wealthy London businessmen have ploughed money into Scotland's Highlands for their own amusement'.

And so the critical attention of the Scottish public - much resented though it is by the landowners - goes on, and on, too. Why is this? Why do people still care?

A little history might now be in order.