

10. A New Land League

‘They openly go about stating their determination to stand by one another, and on no account to yield up one inch of the land seized, holding that it is better to go to prison than suffer longer as they are doing, seeing their families starving before their eyes. The position of affairs is serious, the unrest spreading rapidly’.

THE TWENTIETH century opened with the death of Victoria, the succession of Edward VII and general elections carried along on a strong tide of imperialist sentiment. The war with the Boers for the possession of South Africa was the principal focus of enthusiasm (though the vexed question of Ireland and her independence was never far from the centre of things).

But it was a significant sign of the effect that land agitation in the Highlands had exerted over the previous twenty years that, for the first of these general elections, the manifesto of the Labour Representation Committee was pledged to the ‘nationalisation of the land’; while even the Liberal manifesto contained the encouraging, if not exactly specific, phrase, ‘so long as our land laws are unreformed’. In the event Conservative and Liberal Unionists took 403 seats in the House of Commons and the Liberals 183, with three seats going to Labour and Independent members.

The results in the Highlands also reflected the political warfare over issues unconcerned with the land question. Inverness Burghs was contested by a Liberal and a Liberal Unionist, the latter taking the seat. A Conservative beat a Liberal in Wick Burghs and Argyll. In Caithness a Liberal beat a Conservative and two Independent Liberals. (One of them was G. B. Clark, the other F. C. Auld,

running as a joint candidate of the Land Law Reform Association of Caithness). In Inverness-shire a Liberal also held off the Conservatives. In Orkney and Shetland a Liberal Unionist took the seat from a Liberal. In Ross and Cromarty, J. G. Weir for the Liberals held off a Conservative; and in Sutherland a Liberal Unionist saw off a Liberal.

But the old refrain of 'the land for the people' could still insistently be heard in Highland politics in the first decade or so of the new century. In the years leading to the Great War, this demand for land was accompanied by a steady rise in deer-afforestation; landlord obstruction generally of popular aspiration for the land; a failure of government agencies to effect significant land-reform in the crofting counties; and the increasing, formal identification of the Highland land question with the young Labour movement in Scotland. (By 1900 at least 50,000 people in Glasgow alone can, considering the effects of continuing Highland immigration to the city, be calculated as having been Gaelic speakers).

For the Highland élite, meanwhile, the dawn of the new century promised an age at least as generous in its charms and advantages as that which had preceded it. By the autumn of 1900, for instance, the recreational 'sporting season' in the Highlands was well under way. 'Excellent sport' was reported from the vicinity of Dunrobin, from the Ben Alder forest, from the Glenquoich deer-forest, and from Argyll (where the gentry were congregating in their lodges and steam-yachts, among them the earls of Harrowby and Dufferin), and from Badenoch, where Lord Southampton and guests had obliterated three and a half hundred brace of grouse in four days.

Shortly afterwards too, in Lewis, Major Duncan Matheson, by now in control of the estate, was importing 140 deer from England 'in order to improve the stock of his forests'. At the same point, the Oban Times was carrying an advertisement from the MacDonald estates on Skye offering for let the farms of Boreraig and Suisnish, in the parish of Strath, extending to 3,000 acres and carrying a Cheviot stock of 800 sheep.

In this sense at least, little or nothing had changed; and thus from the very opening of the century there was to be a steady stream, at times bursting into spate, of anti-landlord direct-action in the Highlands. It was one that would run strongly right up until the opening of the Great War itself.

Over the first five years of the period, agitation was concentrated in the outer and inner Hebrides. In Barra, for instance, there was a marked upsurge of agitation towards the end of 1900, which culminated on 15 September in 'the forcible seizure of the farm of Northbay'. Two thousand people were living on the island's 25,000 acres, while three-quarters of these acres were in the possession of just three farmers - 'their portion being principally arable land and pasture of a very fine description'.

The people, meantime, were 'housed in a deplorable manner. The miserable patches of rock and peat cultivated by them cannot be called land but for want of better they raise their yearly supply of potatoes as best they can in such patches'. Since the beginning of the previous decade, under the 1892 legislation purporting to give county councils the power to acquire land for settlement purposes, the tenants at Northbay had been petitioning for more land. They had eventually 'endeavoured to obtain by enforcement of the compulsory clauses of the Allotments Act by the County Council of

Inverness some amelioration of their wretched conditions but the influence of landlordism in the country council proved too strong'. After five years of complaining, the parish council of Barra had finally warned of 'a cottar upheaval through its refusal to give justice'.

The people had already petitioned the Congested Districts Board to come to their aid, but the Board had replied that it was powerless to help. And thus, 'the whole fishing and cottar population has risen, seized the farm, divided it into lots for crofts and house sites, and cast lots for the different portions. They openly go about stating their determination to stand by one another, and on no account to yield up one inch of the land seized, holding that it is better to go to prison than suffer longer as they are doing, seeing their families starving before their eyes. There is abundance of land in Barra suitable for house sites and crofter holdings, and the people express their entire willingness to pay a just rent for such'.

Commenting on the failure of the CDB to live up to its declared purpose of providing land for the people, the Oban Times condemned the Board and demanded legislation on the basis of recommendations of the Deer Forest Commission. It was a condemnation all the more damning, given that the Board was just three years old, and that its birth had been welcomed as a premonition of great hope.

Spurned by both Board and county council, the Northbay land-raid-ers also petitioned the island's owner, Lady Gordon Cathcart - though without much hope, given the long-established nature of the Gordon-Cathcart regime in the southern isles. As Thomas Johnston was to observe just nine years later, her ladyship could be presumed to be, through marriage, 'a genuine Huntly Gordon of the real old tooth-and-talon breed. While still on the sunny side of

twenty summers [she] married John Gordon of Cluny. In 1880, two years after Mr. Gordon's death, she married Sir Reginald Cathcart. Lady Gordon Cathcart had not visited Barra for some thirty years'. Thus within a fortnight of the raid on Northbay, Gordon Cathcart's lawyers were writing to the Congested Districts Board, urging it to put a stop to raiding in whatever way possible (the presumption being that neither she nor it thought that a police-military force could be acquired).

She was, however, decisively thwarted on this occasion, though at some considerable cost to the public purse. The following spring the CDB bought Northbay farm and some of the nearby farm land of Eoligarry, amounting to almost 3,000 acres of land, from which just under sixty holdings were to be formed. In other words, the raid had resulted in a very clear and certain victory for the raiders despite the obstruction of the landlord and the weakness of statute and official agency. This lesson was not to be lost on the rest of the Hebrides either.

During that same winter there was trouble at Sconser on Skye, scene over the best part of thirty years of anti-landlord direct-action on the part of crofting tenants. In October, Lord MacDonald's factor, who had acquired a sheriff's order empowering him to remove crofters' stock from Sconser, wrote to the chief constable of the county in some alarm. 'I am convinced that as soon as I proceed to carry out the sheriff's orders these crofters will be up in arms and use force to prevent me. With a force of thirty police I do not think that a riot would be attempted but this, I am convinced, is the only means of preventing one, so I write to ask if you can oblige me by supplying me with such a force'.

The chief constable replied to the effect that he would consult with the sheriff of the county. The sheriff advised that it would be better to despatch a sheriff-officer first. If (or when) that officer was deforced, then a party of police would be considered.

At the end of October the factor reported again to the chief constable. He had, as advised, sent a sheriff-officer to Sconser. The officer had, however, managed to serve only half his writs, 'when the people apparently found out the reason for his visit, upon which the township gathered round and stones and dirt were thrown'. Dogs were also set on the sheriff officer, but evidently did not touch him. 'The people told him that for his own sake he had better stop and further said that if anyone came to remove sheep, half a dozen of them would never return'.

The sheriff-officer, meanwhile, complained to the procurator-fiscal, in a clear attempt to involve the police. He demanded the eviction of five crofters who had 'caused an irritancy of their tenancy'. He claimed that his party had been 'accosted' by about a dozen men. 'These men at once adopted a threatening attitude and told us that we had come far enough, that they wanted no more of our papers, and if we were wise for ourselves, that we had better return the way we had come as quickly as possible. As I saw the crowd was increasing and getting more threatening, I displayed my Badge of Office and Wand of Peace and declared myself deforced. A mob of about forty women and children [came] after us and over a dozen collie dogs, which they hounded upon us'.

He also attempted to implicate the local teacher. 'My own opinion was that the scholars of the school were let out for the express purpose of following and annoying us. They followed us for

about a mile on the road and besmirched us with clods and mud and everything filthy they could’.

The sheriff-officer took particular care to report that when he asked the crowd whether they would prevent him serving his notices (a standard procedure, or manoeuvre, by which he could simply prove deforcement in court if anyone had answered in the affirmative) the local teacher called out to the people to remain silent. This they did. As a result, the procurator fiscal thought it uncertain whether the officer had, in law, been deforced at all. The sheriff-officer complained about all of this to the factor, who urged him to go to the police as a means of bringing some discreet pressure to bear on the chief constable.

As a result of what clearly seems to have been a conspiracy on the part of minor officialdom to bring in the police and crush crofter resistance at Sconser, the police inspector at Portree wired in code to both the chief constable at Inverness and the procurator fiscal at Strathpeffer. And in the middle of November, the chief constable (still MacHardy) wrote to the factor that the sheriff had granted permission for a police expedition to Sconser, scheduled for the middle of January, ‘in order to allow full time for conciliatory influences to operate’.

In December, however, the matter of the imminent assault was raised in parliament, with questions directed towards the Lord Advocate. The authorities at once backed down. The estate offered the Sconser people land at Boreraig and Suisnish (from which, of course, tenants had been cleared only a few decades earlier). In Sconser, as at Northbay, the common people had won: and if their victory was a small one on the Highland scale it was, at least, a mighty one in Sconser.

Meantime, the spirit of agitation was undimmed in North Uist. There, 'the cottars have been clamouring for land for a generation or two back and, having lost all faith in the working of the CDB, openly declare that they are forced to revolt in order to obtain sufficient pieces of land to live on'. There were several hundred cottar families involved. Many of them had applied to the Deer Forest Commission, the County Council and the Congested Districts Board for land. A small estate had recently come on the market. The people had applied to the Board for it to be divided among them, but the Board had rejected the demand, claiming that the land was unsuitable.

The reply 'exasperated' the cottars. 'A great number of them went in a body on Saturday to part of the lands of the estate and marked out small crofts for themselves. One cottar said it was quite clear to him that the only way to get the Congested Districts Board to work sensibly was for the people everywhere to break the law. They declared they would seize and hold the land by force, no matter how many of them had to go to prison. Several cottars referred to their sons and brothers fighting in South Africa. Further developments are anxiously looked for, as many crofters are to join in with them in order to get better lands than those they have'.

And within a week the spirit of 'unrest and agitation' over the seizure of the land, at Griminish and Vallay, was spreading throughout the island. 'On Tuesday night a great meeting of crofters and landless cottars was held at Bayhead, representatives from various townships being present'. The chairman, Norman MacDonald, a cottar of Bayhead, reminded his audience that 'over half a century ago their forefathers were ruthlessly evicted from their homes in Griminish to make way for sheep farmers'. For nearly a

generation they had been agitating to have the land returned. They wanted the farms of Vallay, Griminish, and Scalpaig, and would take them and keep them, unless the CDB swiftly bought-out the landlord, Campbell Orde (who had in any case been trying to sell the farms for more than two years). Thus the people would again petition the CDB and parliament; but 'unless a speedy, favourable reply' was got, 'forcible measures' would be taken.

In various parts of Lewis too, there was a popular demand for holdings - not least on the farms at Aignish and Gress, notable locations of land-seizures twenty years earlier. The CDB approved of the scheme to divide the farms into holdings. Major Matheson, however, disagreed. To cede the farms for division into crofts would render the land subject to the protection of the Crofters' Act and thus closed to its free exploitation on the open market. It would also encumber the major's island with the sort of 'kinsmen' then fighting the Empire's cause in South Africa. And so the Board was 'accordingly unable to take any further steps in the matter'.

There was also further trouble on Bernera, scene of the great anti-landlord riot of 1874. Seven years earlier, the island's cottars had asked the Deer Forest Commission to have the farm of Croir divided among them, and since then applications had been made to both landlord and factor. Therefore, towards the end of April, getting no satisfactory response from either government agency or landlord, 'a number of cottar-fishermen took possession of the farm and marked it off in lots. They seem determined to retain possession'.

In due course the land-raiders of Croir received notices of interdict from Matheson. In open defiance, they responded by planting potatoes on the land they had marked for popular re-possession. The matter was raised in the House of Commons, but

the Lord Advocate announced that he was not prepared to introduce legislation 'to increase facilities already given as regards the acquisition of land in the congested districts of the Highlands'. And thus, before the month was out, 'the hunger for more land all over the island estate is now developing into an open revolt at the refusal by the responsible authorities to give any heed to the solicitations of poverty-stricken cottars and crofters for patches of land to live on'.

By now, the remaining sheep-farms in the Highlands were on the brink of an acute crisis, with land increasingly being turned to deer. 'The price of blackface wool has fallen to a minimum, the larger farms cannot find tenants, and landlords all over the country are transforming vast tracts of pasture into deer-forests', in the words of the Oban Times.

The popular demand for these 'vast tracts of pasture' remained as high as ever; but the CDB was unable to satisfy it. The Board had originally been appointed for a five year term, but after just three years its performance was drawing the fire of the Highland press. 'With more than half of its life having expired', in the words of one report, 'it should be able to reckon on the completion of nearly one half of its duties. We do not think the people of the congested areas will take that view. If it proceeds during the next two years at the leisurely pace of the last three, it will at the end of its term leave the Highlands with the problems of congested districts untouched at its foundations. We can only have congestion eradicated by the thinning out of the people over the land. It is a first duty of the Board to bring congestion to an end, and judged by that duty, its three years' administration has come painfully short of the mark'.

As a result, agitation flared once again on South Uist, at lochdar, where the estate factor had demanded that the crofters

erect a protective fence between their patches of land and the contiguous Griminish farm (upon which, clearly, the crofters had been allowing their stock to graze). This demand, however, 'revealed to the crofters that there was no intention of relieving their present poverty-stricken condition, and the largest meeting ever to take place on the land-question in South Uist was at once held'. Restoration of the land had commenced at the beginning of the new century, and it would not stop until 'complete restoration had taken place'.

There was also trouble in the towhsips of Suishvale, Howbeg and Howmore, where the tenants of Gordon Cathcart met to decide how to 'force' land from the estate, and to hold a demonstration against 'the tyrannical laws which subject cottars and small crofters to starvation when ample ground is available'. Thus a great crowd headed by pipers marched on the farm of Bornish and marked it out in crofters' holdings. Resolutions were then passed by the marchers to the effect that 'after 25 years asking peaceably for land, their application being unheeded, they resolved to delay no longer in taking such lands'.

In May 1903 the farms of Milton and Ormiclate were seized and apportioned among the people, who were preparing the land for cultivation, and were determined 'to retain forcible possession'. And within a week, twenty-five cottars from Stoneybridge had taken possession of the Bornish farm and divided it among themselves, in time for the spring planting of crops.

Nor were these short-lived incidents. Indeed, the agitation in South Uist continued unabated over the following three years, by which time the crofters at Howbeg were marching 'in procession, with flags flying and headed by pipers, to the farms of Ormiclate and

Bornish, and again took possession'. Twenty-one holdings were pegged out and temporary huts made ready, for use when they began cultivation. On the same afternoon the crofters of Stoneybridge marched to the Ormiclate machair, near Loch Olay, and divided it into thirty holdings. They had, in fact, first seized this land, the best in the district, during the winter of 1883-1884; at the time of the passing of the Crofters' Act in 1886 they had asked to be given it, but were debarred by the restrictive conditions imposed by the estate at the time.

In December 1904 they again asked for the land. But again Gordon Cathcart refused. It was, of course, a fact that 'in the early years of last century the machair had been part of the Stoneybridge crofters' holdings, but they were dispossessed and the land added to the Ormiclate farm'. The farm, along with that at Bornish, ran to 20,000 acres of hill and low ground, 'in every sense suitable for settling crofters'. Great unrest reportedly prevailed among the cottars, 'who have made up their minds to hold the land they have seized against all comers. They are determined that they will have the land for themselves. It is said that the cottars of lochdar and Daliburgh districts, who are reported to be restless, will also soon seize the large farms of Gerinish, Drimore and Milton. In that event, 'the whole of the island of South Uist will be in their hands'.

During this period there were numerous other incidents both on the mainland and in the inner Hebrides - not least on Tiree, where crofters and cottars met once again to demand more land. The Duke of Argyll, however, counselled them otherwise. 'You should enlist in the Naval Reserve. There are very many lowland farmers anxious to get workers now. I am also willing to assist in

getting good lands for those who may like to join their friends in New Zealand and Canada’.

And in Skye, by the winter of 1905-1906, agitation was also in the ascendant, on a scale of twenty years earlier - as a steady stream of press stories and reports to the authorities indicate only too clearly. The Inverness Courier, for instance, was reporting mass meetings at the Quiraing that February; the Highland Times wrote of expected raids at Snizort the following month; and the Scotsman throughout March and April reported trouble at Uig and planned raids at Kilmuir (‘discontent, disturbance and lawlessness are once again appearing in the crofter country’).

And on the wider scale of national affairs, the land question had continued to exercise the interest of significant sections of Scottish public and political opinion.

Though as early as January 1900 the nationalist quarterly Scottish Review was lamenting (in an article on the taxation of land values) that ‘Home Rule is dead or dying’, nationalist publications continued to give prominence to land-reform. For example, the very first issued of the occasional Fiery Cross announced, ‘We will advocate the restoration of the people to the land of their fathers’.

Nor did the subject escape the notice of the monthly tabloid Scottish Patriot. As the 1903 ‘sporting season’ in the Highlands got under way, it published a full page showing the extent of deer-forests in Scotland, illustrating the extraordinary degree to which the common people, particularly in Inverness-shire and Ross-shire, had been driven to the coastal margins of the land in the cause of deer-forests. Two months later, in an article ‘on the land monopoly’, the paper was explaining how the ‘Congested Districts Board betrays its trust’.

Throughout the following year the Scottish Patriot campaigned on the land question in general, and in particular on rights-of-ways in Blair Atholl, under the heading, 'The Duke of Atholl as a Land-Grabber'. The paper opened this campaign with a reference to a celebrated dispute away back in the previous century; 'there are still Robertsons alive who remember their clansman Dundonnachie and the case of the bridge-toll. The question of the land in Scotland and especially in the Highlands is the leading question in Scotland at the present day'. Throughout the summer and autumn of that year, the periodical sustained a campaign fighting-fund raised by public subscription.

And that same winter the nationalist Guth na Bliadhna observed, 'it is really monstrous that huge tracts of the Highlands and Islands should be denuded of their inhabitants in order to make room for deer; and we beg leave to remark that were this country governed at home instead of at Westminster, a state of affairs so humiliating and depressing, so morally unsound and so economically wrong as this is, would never have been suffered to endure, much less to attain its present scandalous dimension. From one-seventh to one-sixth of Scotland belongs to red deer'.

The continuing interest in the land question, and its continuing identification with issues of class and nationality, was reflected in the 1906 general election, when the Liberals took 399 seats, the Conservatives (including 25 Liberal Unionists) 156, and Labour 29 seats. Only the Labour manifesto, however, specifically mentioned the land, asserting that 'overcrowding continues while the land goes to waste. Increasing land values go the people who haven't earned them'. In the town of Inverness and the county of Sutherland, a Liberal beat a Liberal Unionist. In Wick, a Conservative beat a

Liberal. In each of Inverness-shire, Orkney and Shetland, Argyll and Caithness, a Liberal beat a Conservative. And in Ross and Cromarty the Liberal J. G. Weir also beat-off the Conservatives. Radicalism in Labour form, in other words, was nowhere near a breakthrough in the Highlands. For the time being (and for rather a long time to come), the Liberals were secure in the Highlands, if increasingly nowhere else.

But for the vanguard of the Labour movement land remained central to its perception of the future. That perception was given focus and direction by, above all, Thomas Johnston's wonderful weekly, the *Forward*. Founded in 1906, *Forward* was to become almost at once a paper unequalled (with the exception of the *West Highland Free Press*) by any other in twentieth-century Scotland. Most of its early contributors and production journalists were Fabians, but they included Roland Muirhead, who - along with Dr. G. B. Clark - was often to rescue the title from financial disaster. The Irish connection was maintained by having James Connolly as Dublin correspondent; and the socialist connection by the likes of extremely gifted writers and organisers such as John Wheatley, whose principal strategic vision was to secure the Irish working-class vote in Scotland for Labour. Wheatley's adoption of socialism had co-incided with the launch of *Forward*. John MacLean was another contributor.

In its first two or three years, *Forward* devoted regular space to coverage of the land-question, including the theories of Henry George, of which it was highly critical, but which were still influential at municipal level in the west of Scotland. It also scrutinised the proceedings in parliament of legislation on the land question, for the

Liberal government of 1906 was committed to an ambitious, in unspecific, programme of land reform.

Many Liberals, however, not to mention the Conservatives and the House of Lords, were opposed to any such reform. By the end of 1906, *Forward* was republishing House of Commons voting lists on a clause of the Land Tenure Bill, which clause proposed to enact that the consent of landlords was not necessary or required for certain improvements made by tenants to holdings. Of those voting, only two Scottish MPs were in favour. One was Labour, the other the Liberal member for Sutherland. And a week later *Forward* could editorialise that, 'the present government came into power pledged to Land-Reform, and it has begun the task of redeeming its pledges, so far as Scotland is concerned, by framing the Small Holdings Bill. Even men who stand aloof from party politics are genuinely surprised at such legislation proceeding from a Cabinet that is largely composed of capitalists, lairds and lawyers'.

The surprise was not mis-placed. By the following July the Bill was 'being mangled in committee', according to *Forward*; while the same edition reported the vote on the proposal of the Labour leader Arthur Henderson to abolish the House of Lords. (Those voting against the motion included the members for Argyll, Inverness, Caithness, Inverness-shire, Sutherland, and Ross and Cromarty; proof-positive to *Forward* that the Highlands needed independent Labour representation in parliament).

The hegemony of the lairds and lawyers in parliament was matched on the ground in Argyll. In November *Forward* was reporting that of the fifty-seven members of Argyll County Council, thirty-nine were landlords and factors and another eight were merchants, farmers, ministers - and lawyers. Of the eighteen-

strong small-holdings committee of the council, sixteen members were either landlords or factors. Every large estate in the county was directly represented on the committee by either a landlord or his factor; while the Duke of Argyll's estate was represented by two factors.

Popular demand for the land nevertheless remained a strong undercurrent to affairs in the Highlands. In the winter of 1906 - 1907, a Highland Crofters' and Cottars' Association was established. 'We cannot afford any longer to be dominated by a gang of obstructive Peers, most of them English, some of them Scots. The aim of the Highland Crofters' and Cottars' Association is to restore the land to the people and the people to the land'.

And the Oban Times was still campaigning on land-reform, demanding that the powers of the Congested Districts Board be 'considerably extended, so as to include among other things, the power of compulsory purchase of land, at present used for the purposes of sport, in order to extend existing small agricultural holdings and to create new ones'. By way of support for this, the raiders at Bornish and Ormiclate farms were by the middle of March, 1906, simply cultivating the land. Further, 'a large number of crofters and cottars from lochdar and Lower Carnan' then marched in procession to the farms of Gaerinish and Drimore, and took possession: 'The farms were formerly in the occupation of their fathers and grandfathers, and the ruins of the dwellings are still to be seen'.

That spring, the chief topic of conversation in Highland communities was the proposed new legislation on the land question. And as pro-crofter members pressed their case in the Commons, all

eyes were on the latest development in the long-running Vatersay dispute.

As the landless and land-hungry in the north of Barra had wished for land in that part of the island, so those in the south, around Castlebay, had longed for land on the island of Vatersay. Referring to Barra, after all, the Napier Commission of twenty-odd years earlier had reported, 'the cause of the prevailing poverty is easily arrived at; it is the want of land. The land is particularly hilly and rocky, yet there is enough of good land, if it were divided among the people'.

In September 1900, therefore, Vatersay had been raided by Castlebay area people. The island was the second largest farm on the Cathcart estate, and had been scheduled by the Deer Forest Commission as suitable for crofter settlement. Twenty cottars from Glen and Kentangaval warned the Cathcart factor that 'dire poverty would not permit them to wait any longer', and that if a favourable answer was not given to their request for land, they would go ahead and take possession of it. 'If you require time to consider your decision', they wrote to the factor, 'we are willing to wait for fifteen days, but if a favourable answer is not forthcoming within that time, we give you fair notice that we will take action without it'. Five hundred people waited a whole day in Castlebay for the factor's answer; Vatersay was then invaded and plots were pegged-out.

And the following spring Vatersay was again raided. 'Six large fishing boats laden with fishermen and cottars crossed to Vatersay and took formal possession'.

In 1903 the CDB finally bought just sixty acres of the island, Lady Cathcart making a handsome profit from the sale, and the land was divided into fifty potato plots. This, however, failed to still the

agitators, and in 1906 there was yet another raid on the island, with fifty cottars landing in February, ferrying stock over from Barra throughout the summer and building homes for their families. By the following year they had completed twenty such houses, and showed every determination of staying on the island for good. The CDB therefore asked the Cathcart estate to establish a crofting township on Vatersay. The estate refused and offered to sell the entire island to the Board - at a huge profit, and at a price that the Board could not in any case afford. The estate then took legal action against the raiders, for Cathcart 'had carried concession beyond all reasonable limits' and, as she told the authorities, 'such a combination as now exists for taking and keeping violent possession of private property constitutes a condition equivalent to anarchy or to civil riot'.

In June, therefore, ten of the Vatersay raiders appeared in court in Edinburgh, at the complaint of Cathcart, 'with the concurrence of the Lord Advocate', to answer charges that they had in breach of interdict remained in occupation of the land they had seized. The Lord Justice Clerk gave them all two months in Calton Gaol for refusing to give an undertaking that they would leave the island. The men were, however, released early and returned by steamer to Barra, whence they proceeded directly to Vatersay to commence cultivation. By the autumn, the CDB had agreed to buy the island for £6,250 (a price that all the raiders believed to be extortionate). This went ahead despite a last-ditch attempt by Cathcart to thwart the settlement, on the grounds that there was not enough rain on the island.

Agitation on Barra was not stilled, however, and in March 1909 the landless people of the north of the island - 'being utterly despondent of getting land', and having petitioned the authorities

without redress - raided the Ardmore part of Eoligarry. Glendale in South Uist had also lately been raided, and there were 'rumours that a raid is imminent on Milton Farm'.

Throughout this period, Forward kept up its agitation on the land question, with the clear purpose of promoting anti-landlord direct-action in the Highlands. It was, in this respect, a direct successor to the Highlander and the Scottish Highlander. But in two other respects, at least, it was different. Firstly, it was driven by a vision of the land question as an all-Scottish issue; secondly, it commanded a very clear vision of the solution to land-hunger, namely nationalisation of the land. However, in journalistic brilliance, Forward was a formidable match for John Murdoch's Highlander (though it missed, perhaps, something of Murdoch's concern for the integrality of a distinctive Highland culture to Scottish politics); and in these early years of the twentieth century, Forward easily deployed a greater degree of influence on the land-agitation than any other title.

Quite apart from its series on 'Our Noble Families', which ran throughout the first half of 1909, Forward gave space to the cause of large-scale timber-growing versus vast areas of hill-land devoted to deer; reported popular agitation on a rights-of-way issue in the Vale of Leven; and campaigned against the continuing influence of Henry George's theories on land taxation. It also printed the voting records of selected Scottish MPs, among them the Liberals John Ainsworth for Argyll, Munro-Ferguson, Annan Bryce for the burgh of Inverness, and John Dewar for Inverness-shire itself. It printed with dismissive scorn an invitation from the Marquis of Tullibardine for Thomas Johnston to visit the Atholl Forest during the grouse season. (Johnston nevertheless despatched an undercover 'special

commissioner' to Atholl, whose reports ran under the headline 'Breadalbane Clearances going on now!')

The paper printed an appeal from six Uist crofters at Dalbeg (which suggests that the paper was certainly circulating in the Hebrides). It publicised the effect of exclusion from the Crofters' Act on Arran, and reported the unanimous support of Shetland County Council for land-nationalisation. It introduced John Wheatley, 'president of the Catholic Socialist Society', on land-monopoly; the Rev. Malcolm MacCallum of Muckairn on deer-forests versus crofters; and G. B. Clark on the Highland land question. It attacked the government's record on land-reform (in a review of three years of Liberal administration). And towards the end of the year, Forward launched the first of what would be many attacks on the Liberal MP for Caithness, Harmsworth, a London newspaper owner (and owner of the Northern Ensign).

But it was to the re-formation of the Highland Land League that much of the weekly tabloid's energies were devoted in the second half of 1909. This, clearly, had been planned for some time and the paper's sustained coverage was to form the impetus for the launch of the new organisation. On 3 July 1909, Forward carried a long letter from Alistair Sutherland, a one-time delegate to the 1884 conference of the 'old' Land League, which included the observation that 'there are not wanting signs of an impending upheaval in the Highlands of Scotland'. This sort of upheaval was, to the editors of Forward, 'the crofters' only hope'.

The following week the paper carried a half-page appeal, headlined in Gaelic with the slogan of the 'old' Land League - 'shoulder to shoulder'. Signed by 'The Editor', it called for a new

Highland Land League to 'carry on a militant propaganda especially in the non-crofting counties'.

A week later, the political basis of the proposed new League became clear: its slogan would be, 'no landlord need apply'. Forward ran two columns to explain why the new League would be entirely separate from the Liberals. They were written by Hamish MacRae, grandson of a Sutherland evictee, and headlined, 'the traitors who misrepresent us'.

Correspondence and reports were carried at length in each of the next five issues: while on 28 August the paper carried two columns on the 'Highland Land League - an appeal to the working man', as token of its clear orientation to the Labour movement. And a week after that, Johnston spelled out this orientation more clearly, with reports on the League's formal inauguration.

Its president was G. B. Clark; its vice-president was Thomas Johnston; Roland Muirhead of Bridge of Weir was treasurer; and Alexander Mowat of Glasgow's Partick district was secretary. The constitution proposed 'to bring about the restoration of the people to the soil' and to abolish deer-forests and 'pluralist farmers'; while a key clause referred to 'the ownership and control of land by the State'. It added that all new candidates endorsed or supported by the League were to sign the constitution of the Labour Party.

Thus a week later Forward was reporting that Keir Hardie would tour the Highlands for the new League. A week after that, in the course of the 'great Budget demonstration' in Glasgow, when 100,000 workers marched, there was a Highland Land League contingent with banner, platform and its own speakers in Glasgow Green. Two months later the League had produced its first pamphlet on the landlord question.

In the Highlands, meanwhile, and particularly on the western seaboard, anti-landlordism was unabated. On Tiree, the demand was unbroken for further land-reform; in Uist the Milton farm, if not broken up quickly, was under threat of seizure; and in Lewis a local farm had been seized by the cottars of Shawbost as early as May. Indeed, by the following month 'neither persecution nor threats of imprisonment can seemingly avail anything in preventing illegal seizures of land by the cottars of the Western Isles'. The Dalbeg farm was still under occupation - 'it is reported that the whole of the landless population of the island are extending their sympathy and support' - while there was also talk of raids on Harris. From Lewis the cottars of Back, Coll and Vatisker wrote to warn that unless they were given land, they would take it for themselves on the first day of the following October. Yet again, the Commons discussed the land question in the Highlands, in a 'debate that should be an object lesson to crofters and their friends'; and by the end of the year, the agitation for land was as strong as ever in Skye.

The new year opened (and closed) with a general election. In the first, in which the Liberals took 511 seats (compared to 273 for the Conservatives) Labour got 40 seats. The Labour manifesto had declared, 'the country has allowed landowners to pocket millions of pounds every year in the shape of unearned increment. Our present system of landownership has devastated our countryside. The land for the people!'

In the second election, the Conservatives took 273 seats, the Liberals 271 and Labour 42; once again, land-reform had been high on the Labour programme. (The Conservatives had been more worried about threats to the unelected second chamber - 'behind the Single Chamber conspiracy lurks Socialism and Home Rule' - as

token of the looming constitutional crisis over the power of veto exercised by the House of Lords).

In Scotland, in the first of these elections, the Liberals took 54 per cent of the vote, the Conservatives and the Liberal Unionists 40 per cent, and Labour just five per cent. In the second, the Liberals again took 54 per cent, the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists just under 43 per cent, and Labour just over three per cent. This was to be the last general election until 1918; and in it, the continuing hegemony of the Liberals in Scotland is clearly seen. In the Highlands, this hegemony was particularly marked, Liberals winning every seat in each of both elections. (As to Highland by-elections, there was one in Ross and Cromarty in 1911, another in Wick in 1913, and a third in Inverness-shire in 1917. The Liberals took them all).

In the face of this, however, Johnston's *Forward* agitated with rare persistence. Throughout 1910, the paper ran a long series of 'rambling recollections' by G. B. Clark, including pieces on 'how we roused the Highlands', 'the curse of English dominance', 'the fight for the crofters and the Crofters' Act', and 'how we beat the landlords'. There were many other such pieces.

But the greatest effort went into promoting the League. In the first general election of that year, for instance, it was planned to run C. A. Paterson in Caithness. In the event he did not run, on account of the hold 'Harmsworth and his money' had on the constituency, 'with his paid man in every parish'. By the spring, however, 'an effective summer campaign' was being organised, while the annual meeting of the League returned as office bearers G. B. Clark, C. A. Paterson, Thomas Johnston and the Rev. Malcolm MacCallum of Muckairn.

The new League was active in Mull: and Caithness too, where one meeting drew a crowd of close to a thousand people (though it went unreported in Harmsworth's Northern Ensign), and where four branches were in operation. Speakers were also despatched for Fort William, Skye, Raasay, Islay, Banff and Argyll, in which county there were active branches at Campbeltown and Carradale. Branches would also shortly be formed in Edinburgh and Dundee. Towards the end of the year, the League would draft a parliamentary bill to amend the 1897 Congested Districts Act - or 'Home Colonisation Bill', as it was seen by G. B. Clark.

That winter also saw the first of a long series of Highland Land League Papers, written for the most part by John Fullarton Armour. Among their titles were, 'What the League will Do', 'The Emigration Evil', 'Afforestation - is there a Landlord Conspiracy Afoot?', 'The Congested Districts Board', 'The Sutherlands', 'The Killing of the English Land Act', and 'Liberal Treachery on the Land Bill'.

And though Forward's weekly reporting of events on the ground in the Highlands never matched that of its radical predecessors (and may not have been intended to), nevertheless a close watch was kept on events there, and in the Hebrides in particular. In April 1910, for instance, the paper was reporting a meeting at Idrigill, where it was decided to take by force the farm at Scudaburgh, with a copy of the resolution being despatched to the CDB.

Idrigill, of course, remained a hotbed of anti-landlordism. The authorities were receiving (coded) messages by telegraph to the effect that 'the ground-officer says crofters threatened him with grievous bodily damage if he ever accompanied a sheriff-officer again'. Following this, the procurator wrote to the sheriff: 'The very

active part which the women took in the disturbance is perhaps the most regrettable feature of the whole case. The animosity shown to the sheriff-officers in the old land agitation of the early '80s was very marked. I believe in every case practically in which they were resisted the plan was adopted, which was followed at Idrigill, of putting the women (and frequently children) in front of the crowd and getting them to pelt the officers. It therefore seems to me to be necessary that such action should now be taken as will make it plain to the people at Idrigill that they will not escape the consequences of their conduct. Otherwise, there is only too good reason to fear that the spirit of lawlessness will spread. It is a most infectious disease and in Skye at all events I feel sure that for some time to come it will not be safe for any sheriff-officer to attempt to execute a warrant'.

The procurator also urged the sheriff that the 'ringleaders' they proceeded to select must not be judged by a Skye jury. And thus the Scottish press was shortly reporting, 'Skye crofters sentenced, heavy penalties for contempt, great sensation in the island, relief fund for imprisoned men'. The sentences, however, made little difference. The people of Idrigill, and from throughout Kilmuir, defiantly marched in procession to a mass meeting on Biallach Hill, overlooking Uig - on a spot where Henry George had made a speech twenty-five years earlier calling for land reform - and made it plain that their defiance was the equal of punitive action in the law courts.

The next four years were characterised, therefore, by a continuing trickle of agitation, mainly in the western Highlands; by the manoeuvres and debates surrounding the Small Landholders' Act of 1911; by the popular perception that the provisions of that legislation were inadequate; and by continuing efforts to build the

Leage as an integral part of the Labour movement (though John Wilson, for three years an editor of the nationalist Scottish Patriot, was a member of the League too).

These efforts were not without success, although the League never attained (even if it aspired to) the mass character of the 1880s. But the Labour movement was slowly making progress at local as well as national level. In May 1911, following the death of Galloway Weir, the MP for Ross and Cromarty (who had taken it over from Dr. Roderick MacDonald in 1892 as a Liberal / Crofter), the League even considered running its own candidate - though in the event Ian MacPherson for the Liberals beat off a Conservative in a straight fight.

A month later, however, Forward could editorialise, 'there is in the Highlands enough political sentiment of an advanced type to give Scotland in the House of Commons a group of land reformers, working on independent lines, and with land nationalisation as their goal. The Socialist who come in contact with the Highlands for the first time is astonished at the widespread convictions on the land question which are Socialist in nature'.

That same month, with delegates from every county in Scotland present, the annual meeting of the Highland Land League unanimously agreed to alter its name to the Scottish Land League. It also decided to delete the clause tying the League down to the Labour Party in parliament. Any representation the League might have there in future 'should be independent of all political parties'.

The secretary of the renamed League was C. A. Paterson, who quickly announced that he would contest Argyll at the next parliamentary election as a Liberal and Land Law Reform candidate (having been adopted as such by the Liberal association in the north

of the county, though he was clearly a land-nationaliser). But by the following spring the League, though it had the urban areas of Scotland covered, was appealing for money for a rural organiser; 'the control of the Highlands lies with the Liberal Whips, who find there safe seats for alien reactionaries'.

Meanwhile the League and Forward kept pressing the land question in the Scottish Labour movement, with G. B. Clark arguing that the Labour Party 'must now make a bold bid to capture the imagination of the working class on the Land Question'. The long-delayed small landholders' legislation (its author's military title satirised without mercy by Forward) was also working its way through parliament. Some leading Liberals attempted to sabotage it, and Paterson denounced, in Forward, 'Munro Ferguson's latest landlord trick'.

'Keeping' Sinclair's proposals had twice gone through the Commons in 1907 and 1908 but had been on both occasions destroyed in the Lords. Now, however, with the ending of the Lords' power of veto, these proposals were on the point of enactment, for they were reintroduced as a private measure with government support. The Crofters' Commission and Congested Districts Board would be replaced with Land Court and Board of Agriculture.

The League and Forward scarcely welcomed the new legislation, the pages of the latter giving it a great deal of hostile coverage. According to Paterson, it represented 'the government's great betrayal of Scotland'. And by January 1912 Forward was reporting what it called 'the first fruits of the land-bill treachery', while two months later the Rev. Malcolm MacCallum was bitterly criticising the 'Liberal Land Court'. That May Forward editorialised, 'the first meeting of the Scottish Land Court takes place this week at Tain

when the Landowners' Act will start on its voyage. We have now to create the conditions which will make land nationalisation easy'.

Meanwhile, the League was active in Caithness, complete with county organiser; while Forward, very much in the spirit of MacKenzie and Murdoch with regard to the Napier Commission, followed the progress of the Land Court carefully, and carried a series of exposures on 'landlord extortion and fraud' across the country.

Nor did the new Board of Agriculture escape censure. In April 1913 Paterson wrote in Forward that 'the Board of Agriculture have been trying to negotiate with landlords for the creation of new smallholdings'. The landlords had acted 'according to the traditions of landlordism - blocking any scheme for the benefit of the people except on receiving exceptional blackmail'. And by the summer of 1914, Forward was reporting 'the failure of the Small Landholders' Act'.

With Forward's 'appeal from the Hebrides - the disappearance of the Gael', and 'advice to tenants before the Land Court', went reports of the people of Point in Lewis petitioning the Board of Agriculture for smallholdings; for the Board was very quickly awash with demands for land. This demand, however, the Board was in no position to satisfy quickly (if at all). By the end of 1913 the 700-acre farm of Reef in Lewis was raided by the cottars of Valtos and Kneep, in the parish of Uig. They were 'apparently exasperated at the delay of the Board of Agriculture in dealing with their application for smallholdings'.

Reef had once been a crofting townships and had been raided in 1883. Some of the raiders had at that time been gaoled, their stock sold to pay their legal expenses. Now, however, the raid had

not so much been premeditated 'but was the coming to a head of the discontent that has been seething in the district for some time past. The fear is entertained that the outbreak at Reef is only the beginning of agrarian trouble in the island'.

The following spring, therefore, with the Commons discussing changes to the recent legislation, eleven of the Reef raiders were sent to gaol for six weeks each. Major Matheson had let it be known that he would not press for punishment if the raiders would promise no longer to raid: but to this they would not agree.

During that last winter of peace, indeed, raiding intensified in the Hebrides. In the spring of 1914, raiders had seized Taransay island off Harris, planted forty barrels of potatoes, fenced their crops, and 'now seem to look upon the raided ground as their own. It is reported that building operations have also started'.

By now, however, Europe was poised on the brink of war. The Balkans were the fuse, their peoples having tired of the arrangements of that great 'Peace with Honour' cobbled together at the Congress of Berlin back in 1878. With the distant tap of the recruitment drum growing ever more urgent over the continent, the German and Austrian waiters toiling in the hotels of Oban were being summoned home by telegraph. Still, the Oban Times found space for a letter whose author knew even then 'of Highland clearances as bad as any that have happened in the past'.

ÒI know of men being turned out of the Highlands today, for no other reason than the whim of the laird, and knowing this, can you wonder that a movement is afoot, and gaining ground rapidly, to organise the Highlanders in city and clachan, to fight once more for the cause which the Oban Times has so strenuously advocated?'

In Lewis, crofters were demanding to know why not one acre of land had yet been given to them under the smallholders' legislation; 'a feeling of keen disappointment is threatening to assume a serious character'. The expectations inspired by that legislation had been 'chilled almost out of existence'; and on all sides, there was 'ample evidence of a coming revolt'.

With three and a half million acres of the Highlands now under deer - rather more than at the time of the Deer Forest Commission of twenty years earlier - it was not surprising that another letter-writer to the Oban Times could suggest that 'all ardent advocates of land-reform should see to it that the heather is kept burning. A thorough-going land agitation on land matters seem urgently called for'.

That letter appeared at the end of June. Just a matter of weeks later, Europe was at war.

Within twenty four hours of the declaration of hostilities, over 2,000 people met at Helmsdale, the strath of Kildonan behind them. On the platform was the Inverness journalist Hassan, president of the Inverness Trades Council and son of Laurence, one-time acquaintance of John Dillon and Michael Davitt. Along with him was Joseph MacLeod, doyen of the land-reform struggle of earlier years, who proposed a strong motion on 'the land for the people'.

But the meeting also supported the war, 'secure in the hope that the holy crusade of their fathers would soon be answered and the land restored to the people'. Three days later, Forward attacked Highland landlords in general, and in particular 'the English capitalist who represents Caithness in parliament'.

But by now it was all too late for this sort of class and cultural consciousness (or class and cultural unconsciousness). For the

jingoism of those that met that day, the price would be heavy. And the first murderous instalments were to be payable almost at most.