

## 11. War - and the Promise of Land.

'It is doubtful if the Kaiser himself ever rose to such a height of intolerant impertinence and almighty self-importance as the Duke of Argyll does in his appeal. One would have thought that the Duke would approach these people timidly, saying, I am the representative of a class who bled the Highlands almost white. But there is nothing of that strain about the Duke's appeal'.

IT IS A MATTER for cautionary reflection that the armies of the continental powers sustained far greater casualties in the First World War than the British. Many communities, urban and rural - the countryside as usual the lush granary of fodder for forced-service armies - in Germany and France and Russia suffered terrible devastation. Some civilian populations directly experienced desperate deprivations as well. While two million Poles served in the conscript armies of Russia and Germany and Austria, their national territory was site of the greatest battles of the eastern front. The Polish figure for military dead was something around 450,000: for civilians it was much, much higher. In the five years from 1914, the population - calculated on the basis of the territory of the inter-war republic - fell by four and a half million, or almost 15 per cent.

Overall British mortality was paltry by this sort of standard. But the war still cut swathes through the ruling class, the intelligentsia, and the ranks of the industrial worker and the countryside worker alike. Britain's total of war dead was 745,000. A 1921 parliamentary return simply divided it by ten (in proportion to Scotland's share of the British population) to propose a figure of 74,000 for Scotland's war dead. But the National War Memorial had

suggested in a White Paper a year earlier that the figure was over 100,000. And Scottish territorial battalions, which were largely rural in composition, took dreadful losses - especially in the campaigns of 1915.

Some commentators in the 1920s argued that Scotland endured worse proportionate losses than any other part of the Empire, and that of these losses the Highland share was the greatest. The dead, of course, were overwhelmingly private soldiers: one officer died for every thirteen men.

Certainly, the Highland contribution was a significant one. By the spring of 1915 some 4,500 men were away from Lewis on military service. The fifty-four families in Lower Shader had as many men at the front; the twenty-six families in Ballantrashul had twenty-five men there; and the sixteen families of mid-Borve had eighteen men away. From Lewis, almost 7,000 men joined the forces (and the mortality rate for Lewis, according to one contemporary report, was half as high again as that for all the Imperial forces).

On the mainland, the three seaboard parishes of Wester Ross had seventy-six men killed out of 367 serving; a mortality rate of over 20 per cent. Out of 100 local men in the Seaforth and Cameron regiments, the death rate was 35 per cent, or just about three times the Imperial average. 'Here is the record for the rural school of Auchtertyre in Ross in 1897. On roll, 48; remained in parish, 1; in next parish, 1; returned from abroad, 2; died young, 4; killed in Great War, 5; at sea, 1; emigration to other parts of Highlands, 4; other parts of UK, 10; overseas, 20'.

Many Highland formations were part of the 51st Highland territorial division, a 'flying division' usually in the thick of the action. Three times, its intervention saved the general situation on the

Western Front, albeit at some cost: around 1,500 men were 'lost' at Festubert; 8,500 at the Somme; 2,500 on the Ancre; 2,500 at Cambrai; 5,000 at Morchies-Bapaume; and 2,000 at Rheims.

From the parish of Inverness alone 700 men died. The pattern across the Highlands was similar: 'In quite country places the losses of war were most felt. The percentage of killed in the Empire's forces was 12, but seldom, if indeed ever, were the losses sustained by any Scottish community, urban or rural, so low. Many districts, for example south-west Ross, showed figures for killed of over 23 per cent of those serving. Villages like Dornie and Bundaloch lost one young man out of every three. Of 102 local young men joining the Seaforths and the Camerons from the three parishes of Kintail, Lochalsh and Glenshiel, thirty-six were killed. Such figures were not exceptional. As one moves through the Scottish countryside and looks at the little parish or village memorials, one cannot but realise what irreparable damage was done to the fabric of rural life'.

Two of the casualties from the very early days of the war were the sons of the ill-starred family of wealthy coal-diggers that owned the Arisaig estate. (Local tradition still has it that in the later nineteenth century, the family was cursed, to the effect that no son would ever inherit the estate. It is a matter of fact that none ever did).

The younger son, Stuart, was twenty-five and a lieutenant with the first battalion of the Camerons when he went off to war in August 1914. Within four weeks he was missing, presumed killed, with the Expeditionary Force on the Aisne. Two months before Stuart's departure, his brother William, aged twenty-six, educated at Marlborough and Oxford, had been married in Westminster and had honeymooned at Arisaig House (that many-windowed mansion

beside the beach from which the Young Pretender had left for France in 1746, and from which beach the Jane and Lucy had sailed in 1790). Young William was drawn from the station to the great house by the joyous tenants of the estate, all suitably refreshed. A lieutenant with the second battalion, Camerons, William was killed at Ypres on the evening of 22 February 1915.

Others were to survive, thought at some cost. In 1914, Jock MacKenzie of Ardgay left with the Seaforths, returning but once before his demobilisation in 1919. In one action, he saw his original battalion of over 500 men lose 80 per cent of its fighting strength. Wounded badly and gassed later that year, MacKenzie lay helpless in a mound of dead and dying until a French soldier found him and gave him a shot of rum, which revived him. Three days of crawling and resting between the lines (during which time he was also wounded by shrapnel) took him to a forward dressing station (as these famous chanel houses were known) in the Imperial lines. MacKenzie survived the war. As late as 1981, he still had three German bullets in his body. He also continued to suffer once a year from the effects of gas. He would at once go to the end of his croft with a half-bottle of rum, drink it, and be violently sick; but recover from the effects of the gas. As a small boy he had lived beside two very old women, each of whom had been crippled as young girls in the Greenyards anti-landlord riot of the previous century.

And in North Morar at the start of the Great War, there was a large enough community at the head of Loch Morar for two shinty teams to play, according to one man who was brought-up there prior to going to Gallipoli with the Lovat Scouts. Today, as for many years past, the area is a deer-forest without any resident population, and visitors are not welcome.

If cautionary voices identified these sorts of consequences in 1914, however, they were largely drowned in the clamorous orgy of jingoism with which the Highland gentry - and others - greeted the outbreak of war. In the *Inverness Courier*, for instance, the editor James Barron assured his readers that the 'savage pretensions' of Germany had to be 'reduced to impotence'. Within months, in May 1915 at Festubert, the 4th Camerons were 'losing' 13 officers and 238 men from the lesser, though no less necessary, ranks. And at Loos that autumn the soldiers of the Highland battalions were slaughtered in droves (Barron's son among them).

Such casualty rates did not go un-noticed on the Home Front. Even by the middle of 1915 the children of Easter Ross town were taking care to pretend that they did not see telegraph-boys in the streets (but all the same watched in irresistible terror the home for which they were headed). In some families in Skye - and elsewhere - many sons were 'lost'. From Portree alone, twenty-six men were 'lost' on the night of 17 May 1915, at Festubert. Lord Lovat, in letters to his wife, urged her to get round the crofters on the estate in the cause of morale. The King's message to the Highland Mounted Brigade on its departure for service overseas caught the spirit of the thing all too well: 'I feel sure that the great and traditional fighting reputation of Scotsmen will be more than safe with you and that your Brigade will spare no effort in the interest of the Empire's cause to bring the war to a victorious conclusion'.

The Highland gentry, naturally enough, was prominent in this crusade from the promised land of modern romance; albeit in the officer corps. A century and a half of radical land-centred agitation had not altered that elegant old balance of responsibility. When the 5th Seaforths marched away from Dingwall with the guns of the fleet

crying out over Cromarty and the Union Flag a-swagger on every dunghill steeple, their honorary colonel was none other than his Grace, the Duke of Sutherland. By 1918, they had 'lost' 870 men. Cameron of Lochiel, meanwhile, commanded the 5th Camerons, while 'The MacIntosh of MacIntosh' led that same regiment's third battalion; and Lord Lovat took his Scouts with the Highland Mounted Brigade to Gallipoli's Chocolate Hill (where a number of them still lie, gravestones distinguished by Gaelic valedictions).

As the stream of volunteers for walk-on parts in this grand drama of great-power competition dried up, conscription followed. By the spring of 1917 few appeals against conscription were being granted in the Highlands. Some men - or boys, rather more accurately - were allowed to remain at home, but only until the spring planting was completed. Many old people faced the prospect of having to get the harvest in that autumn on their own. Staple foodstuffs were everywhere in short supply; the rich, indeed, being urged to eat expensive foods that the poor might have more potatoes with which to indulge themselves.

Still, there were important consolations. The Scottish Secretary announced that, 'where the hottest of the fighting has been, there the Highland regiments have been found. After the war every Highland soldier who desires to do so should settle in the homelands and not be shipped to the colonies'.

By the spring of 1918, matters were so serious that the Board of Agriculture was urging people in the Highlands to grow more food. Under the Defence of the Realm Act, the government even made an order authorising the killing of a deer by the occupier of an agricultural holding, if such a deer was trespassing on his grazings or causing injury to his crops. Or to put that another way: nothing

less than a European war was needed to amend the operation of the Game Laws in the Highlands - and then on a temporary and emergency basis only.

What the effects of all this was on the Highlands is not easy to identify with much precision. Military mis-management (and by the pre-war landed classes at that) can hardly have improved popular opinion of them. But the evidence is in short supply, though some suggestion is available from the private war-diary of the Catholic chaplain to the Lovat Scouts at Gallipoli. Hugh Cameron had been priest in Castlebay on the outbreak of war. At the age of forty, he was shortly to find himself in Gallipoli. Towards the end of the disastrous campaign there, he noted, 'rumours of evacuation. The sooner the better. None of us will be sorry to leave this damned hole of a graveyard where so many brave men have fallen in vain. This is for my own use and I can put down my own thoughts for they are the thoughts of all of us. From start to finish, Gallipoli has been a most abominably managed business. Had the fine material available been properly handled we should long ago have been in Stamboul instead of holding three miles of flat dominated on three sides by the enemy. We were up on those heights more than once and bad leadership in high places lost them to us. That is what makes the temper of the army so bitter'.

Another survivor of the Great War said of its effects on South Uist, 'the country was bled white. Where I came from there were seven men killed. It was the same all over the Highlands, it suffered an awful lot of casualties. The first regiment of Lovat Scouts, they were practically all of them Gaelic speakers - but the Highlands were never the same afterwards. You didn't have the same type of men. There's no question, the war made a huge difference. There were

some houses in Uist that lost three and four sons, there was just the mother left and so on, and the place deteriorated. There was hardly a family that didn't lost someone - there was a gloom on them all after it'.

Despite this, however, the land question remained firmly on the domestic political agenda; and increasingly so as the war drew to a close and the dangerous cry was heard again of 'the land for the people' (and this time the people knew rather a lot about the use of firearms). Food shortages alone drew the attention of the state to underused land resources, and cast light on the possibility of a peacetime re-organisation of land-use, tenure and ownership. By the summer of 1916, the matter of post-war land settlement in Scotland was being raised in the Commons; and by that autumn the government's Acquisition of Land Bill was making its way through parliament. A year later 'yet another parliamentary land-reform group' was constituted, with the view that 'the land question must occupy first place in all schemes of social reconstruction after the war'.

And by 1918 the London press was reporting on agitation in Sutherland, Tiree and Skye, along with the proceedings of a deputation from the Scottish Smallholders' Association to Lewis, Sutherland and Caithness. The Association, and its journal *Scottish Smallholder*, had been campaigning for post-war land-settlement, and changes to the 1911 *Small Landholders' Act* since at least 1917. So too had *Land Values*, the journal of the campaign for the taxation of land values, then its twenty-fourth year of publication. *Land Values*, though published out of London, gave sustained coverage to the land question in the Highlands throughout the last year of the war.

It had an active Highland branch based in Inverness, which occupied its time by sending pamphlets on the land question to the Highland soldiers at the front. By February 1918 it was denouncing the 1911 Act as 'already a dead letter in Scotland. The search for land has proved absolutely vain and it is impossible to get suitable land except by paying exorbitant compensation'. Even the Times carried reports from South Uist on Lady Gordon Cathcart's interdiction of her crofters. It also reported from North Uist on Sir John Orde's legal contest with the Board of Agriculture before the Land Court: and on the despatch to prison - at the very moment of Germany's last great offensive on the Western Front - of crofters from Sutherland.

In part at least, this public attention was due to continuing agitation in the Scottish radical and nationalist press on the land issue. In 1914 the Thistle was announcing the nomination of a crofter parliamentary candidate for Inverness-shire (though with the coming of war the election was abandoned). The Thistle also reported that, 'the Small Landholders' Act has neither created, nor met, a demand for land in Scotland'.

Later that year the same journal was covering the extent to which Highland estates accustomed to 'traditional' owners were falling into the hands of what it called 'alien capitalists'. It also reported a private member's Bill in parliament designed to amend the Small Landholders' Act. The Thistle added, 'it has now been in operation for two years. No fewer than 8,000 applications for new holdings or for enlargements to existing holdings have been made, and less than 300 of these have been dealt with. In eighteen counties there are altogether 3,559,744 acres of deer-forests'.

The following year, the author of the failed private member's Bill was writing a Thistle piece on 'the paralysis of Scottish land-reform'. Commenting on the third annual report of the Board of Agriculture, he observed, 'four years have passed and only 434 new holdings have actually been created. Truly a miserable record. A landlord opposition in Scotland persistently dogs the progress of the Act by recourse to every legal expedient to defeat its end'.

From Inverness, the Highland News was also distinctly anti-landlord in tone by the early months of the war. Of the Duke of Argyll's appeal for recruits, for instance, it observed, 'It is doubtful if the Kaiser himself ever rose to such a height of intolerant impertinence and mighty self-importance as the Duke of Argyll does in his appeal. One would have thought that the Duke would approach these people timidly, saying I am the representative of a class who bled the Highlands almost white. But there is nothing of that strain about the Duke's appeal'.

And by March 1915 - of an attempt to repossess crofters' land in the parish of Clyne, by the honorary colonel of the Seaforth Highlanders - the Highland News could observe, 'the House of Sutherland is at its grim work again. It may be using more civilised weapons - perhaps the law courts in place of the crowbar and the torch - but the one thing that matters is the same: the people are to be dispossessed'.

Nor did Forward lose sight of the land question. The sixth edition of *Our Noble Families* appeared in February 1915, the paper billing it as 'an invaluable, unimpeachable and imperishable record of aristocratic tyranny, oppression and land thieving in Scotland - it proves that all the Huns do not live across the Ocean'. (Within just eighteen months, the title was sold-out once again). During the

remainder of that year, Forward ran a series of articles on 'the land and the war', 'the land after the war', and (in April the following year) on 'patriotic landlords - landlord robbery of Board of Agriculture money'.

By 1916, the Thistle was warning, in an article on post-war land settlement, that 'the young men have learned much during their sojourn in the trenches'. And Guth na Bliadhna, in an article on the conduct of the land agitation since 1884, was observing that, 'the movement that culminated in the adhesion of the Scottish land reformers of the 1880s to the Liberals was a fatal mistake in political tactics'.

A year later Forward was reporting that the Scottish Land Court was 'paralysed'. And Thomas Johnston was writing, 'the extraordinary story of how the Scottish Land Act of 1911 has been secretly paralysed in the midst of the great war of liberation - surely to God there's a limit to what the people of Scotland are going to stand!'

Nor had the Land League, despite the pressures of war, disappeared from the scene. The Forward-backed Scottish Land League had sunk from view by the spring of 1915; but by then (and from the end of 1913) a new Highland Land League, with a Gaelic rather than a Labour orientation, had been constituted. Within a month its London-based secretary J. G. Bruce was writing in the Times on deer-forest devastation of agricultural land in Sutherland. By the following year, Bruce was occupying the columns of the Highland News on the Duke of Sutherland's efforts to evict an eighty-three year old man, who had three sons in the armed services, from land near Cnocan, to add it to a grouse moor. By

1916, Forward was reporting 'the communique of the Highland Land League' on affairs in Sutherland.

By this point in the war, the League was under fire from jingoists on account of having appealed for money, on the behalf of crofters, from Highlanders in British colonies - 'thus undermining Imperial resolve'. Nor did it take long for the League to become embroiled (as tradition might be thought to have dictated) between nationalists and socialists; although by this point both were moving, rather unsteadily, one unto the other.

By 1918, indeed, at a delegate meeting of the League in Glasgow, it was decided that the League would affiliate to the Labour Party in Scotland and would run with Labour joint-candidates in all the Highland constituencies at the first available general election. Guth na Bliadhna added after the meeting that 'organised Labour in Scotland would be behind the movement provided Three Capital articles were vigorously supported: National Self-Determination, the Land for the People, and Native Language and Culture'.

Appropriately enough, the Celtic nationalist Erskine of Marr observed in the same edition of Guth na Bliadhna, in an article on the Celtic and Labour movements, that 'hitherto the Celtic movement in Scotland has not been even a popular, much less a democratic, movement. It has divided its attention between the lairdocracy on the one hand and the bourgeoisie on the other'.

By March 1918, G. J. Bruce was touring Lewis. At a meeting in Stornoway the chairman was none other than what the new Stornoway Gazette - founded the previous year by the former Hebridean correspondent of the Highland News - called 'that veteran fighter in the land movement, the Rev. Donald MacCallum'. Other

emissaries of the League were elsewhere in the Highlands, and 'the popular spirit is rising everywhere'. The League's programme, consisting of the Three Essentials - Autonomy for Scotland, the Land for the People, and Native (as opposed to English or Feudal) Culture, was hailed with enthusiasm and adopted by great numbers, wherever it has been expounded and preached'.

By September that year, and the war all but over, the Scottish advisory council of the Labour Party had met in Glasgow and expressed its approval 'of a vigorous democratic policy, based on the recognition of national autonomy for Scotland and the land for the people'. A joint committee of the Labour Party in Scotland and the Highland Land League had been appointed. 'It will shortly issue an appeal to the Scottish people for support in an effort to secure the return, in as many Scottish constituencies as possible, of candidates favourable to autonomy for Scotland and the land for the people. Over forty candidates have been adopted, and the candidates for the Highland constituencies nominated by the Highland Land League and the Labour organisations will shortly be announced. Already the intimation that a big Land and Labour campaign is on foot has aroused considerable consternation in the camps of the old political parties; and in several of the Highland constituencies there has been a shaking of the dry bones of Scottish Liberalism'.

The appeal appeared shortly afterwards, styling itself 'Scotland's National Freedom Fund', with addresses at the headquarters of both the Scottish Labour Party and the Highland Land League. Old themes were apparent. 'The Scottish Labour Party and the Highland Land League, believing that Scotland's interests can best be secured by the re-establishment of the Scottish

Parliament and by the land of Scotland being owned and controlled by the Scottish state [sic], desire your support. Since the Union of Scotland with England in 1707, Scotland has experienced ever-increasing difficulty in obtaining from Westminster that attention to her needs which she demands they deserve. Most of the efforts for reform made by Scotland have been spoiled or defeated by overwhelming English votes. The English people show a marked disposition to conservatism, while the Scottish people on the other hand are undoubtedly progressive in political thought and action. The result of the Union has been that Celtic culture and Scottish ideals are discouraged, while the tendency is for the ideals and culture of England to be thrust upon the country. Large areas of Scottish land have been denuded of people in order to provide sporting grounds for the idle rich'.

In the autumn of 1917, meanwhile, the Bolsheviks had grabbed power in Russia and - by a hairsbreadth - managed to keep it. The apparent common sense of their programme of bread, peace and land must have seem marvellously self-evident to the armies in the mud; and to those who waited for them at home.

In a faint - but, for the landlords, desperately worrying - echo of these events, Forward could headline a story in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik putsch, 'Bolshevik tactics in the Highlands', and go on to record that the Highland Land League 'has its hands full at the moment. Tired of politicians' promises and the dilly-dallying of the Board of Agriculture, groups of men in the Highlands are quietly taking possession of their common heritage'. The League's headquarters, Forward reported, was in contact with raiders in Skye, Raasay, Tiree, and Helmsdale. And a fortnight later it could assert, 'there is nothing in Industrial Capitalism to beat

landlordism for naked, barefaced, impudent exploitation and tyranny’.

In fact, there had been land-raiding even earlier, during the war years. In the spring of 1917, for instance, raiding took place at Kyleakin and Sconser on Skye. That July a spokesman for a number of people from Kyleakin who had occupied grazing land wrote to the factor for the MacDonald estates. ‘We have heard quite enough about this little patch of land and there is no estate authority in Britain which can question the legality of our taking possession of it. We will not give up the land nor pay rent though it cause bloodshed. We shall have none of your interference in this matter in future, but shall have justice and more land to cultivate’.

And from Sconser the Board of Agriculture was informed that part of the deer-forest there had been ‘illegally taken possession of for growing potatoes to the detriment of game preservation. This practice appears to be on the increase’. The Board had received a letter in which the crofters ‘ask the Board virtually to homologate the illegal action taken by them, and the representative of the food production committee in Skye recommends that the crofters be left in possession of the land’.

The Board’s response was that ‘it obviously cannot act as suggested, as similar seizures of land would inevitably follow’.

The complaint about the conduct of the Sconser tenants had been brought by a firm of Edinburgh lawyers, acting for Sir Anthony Abdy, curator bonis (an agent appointed by the Court of Session on petition from medical authorities) for Lord MacDonald, who was then an inmate in an Edinburgh mental asylum. They complained that the Sconser forest, in the past worth £600 a year in shooting rental, was unlet and unlikely to be let ‘at this late date of the year’. Some

months earlier the Sconser people had asked for a part of the deer-forest, and the estate claimed to have offered the use, on unspecified conditions, of the northern part of at Sligachan.

In the opinion of the factor, 'the placing of cattle on this part of the forest would minimise the amount of injury to the forest as a whole. Notwithstanding this offer, several of the crofters recently put cattle on the southern part of the forest, in which is situated the sanctuary for the deer, and according to our latest information they are taking in cattle. The situation is therefore going from bad to worse. The Curator Bonis is naturally most unwilling to take any legal proceedings against the trespassers as his actions would certainly be misrepresented and it is by no means certain that even with a decree of the courts in his favour he would be able to vindicate his legal rights. He deprecates the unwarrantable and unreasonable action of the crofters and fears that, unless the law is enforced, the mischief will spread and injury to many other interests will follow. The estate is very heavily burdened and, owing to the increase in the rate of interest on mortgages, the high rate of income tax and the fact of several of the shootings being unlet, the financial position is most serious. It will be most unfortunate if the illegal methods of the Sconser people are followed by others'.

At much the same time, there was also raiding at the north end of Barra, again at Eoligarry, scene of so much agitation in the previous fifteen or so years. And by the following February, events in Tiree were being raised in the Commons: in due course the Tiree raiders would get ten days each in gaol.

There was also wartime conflict in Sutherland. As early as March 1915, the Highland Land League was calling attention to actions of the Duke of Sutherland in persecuting Highland crofters

and threatening evictions. The publicity related to an eviction attempt on one Joseph MacKay, whose father had been shepherd for a tenant-farmer of the Sutherlands, but who had been dismissed when the hirsels he herded had been put under deer instead. Joseph MacKay, however, insisted on remaining in his father's former cottage, and grazing his own sheep on the land around it. Meanwhile he applied to the Board for an official holding - to which application the estate responded by issuing an eviction notice against him.

The secretary of the League, G. J. Bruce, wrote to the Board, 'the Duke of Sutherland, following the example of his notorious ancestor in 1815, has commenced persecuting Highland crofters and threatening evictions. One of these notices was recently exhibited by me at public meetings in Sutherland'.

The eviction had been threatened the previous July, when the League had held protest meetings: 'I had several hundred men pledged to assist and, on the day war began, we had a meeting of 2,000 in Kildonan. Our League is determined that the practices of the Sutherland family in 1815 will not be permitted in 1915'.

The estate told the Board, with no apparent sense of history, that Knockan, scene of the dispute, was 'near the march of the parishes of Clyne and Kildonan', and added the allegation, with vengeful gratuity, that MacKay's sister was the mother of an illegitimate daughter.

The authorities chose not to treat with Bruce: 'In view of the tone of Mr. Bruce's letter, it seems undesirable to enter into any discussion with him'. Bruce, therefore, was simply reminded that he would 'incur a serious responsibility' if he were 'party to any resistance to the law'. Bruce was not intimidated, and replied, 'I am

to warn your government that if it permits or helps the forcible eviction of an old man of eighty-three, whose three sons are now serving with His Majesty's forces (North Hants Yeomanry, Seaforth Highlanders, and Natal Light Horse) it may only do so over the dead bodies of MacKay and those Highlanders who will defend him'. The matter was also raised in parliament, with the Lord Advocate being asked whether the threatened eviction in wartime Sutherland constituted a breach of the Defence of the Realm Act.

That same summer, nine cottars in the township of Port Gower in the parish of Loth took possession of grazing land on the farm of East Garty, the property of the Duke of Sutherland. The cottars had originally tried to lease the land from the duke, but to no avail: and following the raid on the land (much of it on railway embankments) proceedings were raised in Dornoch sheriff court. Three of the raiders were women, one a widow with two sons on active service; while Hugh Melville had three sons, all volunteers, in the army (two having returned from Canada to join up). Nevertheless, they were all gaoled at Inverness for ten days.

The women, in fact, only served one day. The men, on their release, were met by supporters, 'to salute and honour the men for the brave stand they have made for what was their just right, and what they had been promised. Their incarceration added one more chapter to the battle for land-reform in the Highlands'. The background to the dispute concerned the tenant-farmer of the land in question, who had called in the local police prior to the raid - the local constable informing the chief constable, the procurator and the sheriff in due course that the raiders, 'following incitement by the Highland Land League' had given notice of their intentions to take the land and put stock on it.

This they proceeded to do, despite padlocked gates and the presence of the police (who did not intervene). The farmer himself wrote to the authorities, complaining that he knew one of the raiders to be a Land League member. This man had threatened that 'they were going to take my farm and they were going to fight to the death - it was to be a test-case, and only the first of three in the district'. The farmer, who send his letter by registered mail, also noted that 'the horrible action of the Portgower crofters is really Ireland in Sutherland'. Blithely unaware of the Gaelic resonances of his language, events in Port Gower were no more than, 'actual Sinn Feinism, the Land League is sowing lawlessness and Sinn Feinism'. The matter of events in Port Gower were also raised in the Commons.

Within months, of course, the war was over. The land-question was clearly an important one as far as the 1918 general election went in the Highlands. The 1918 Franchise Reform Act had extended the British electorate from its 1910 level of 7.7 million to 21.4 million, greatly expanding the male working-class electorate, and adding a portion of the female population to the electoral rolls.

The Land League was by now firmly established on the Scottish political scene, in association with the Scottish Labour party and its demand for Home Rule. One League meeting in Greenock, for instance, ended with a recital of some Gaelic songs, following be a rendition by the choir of the Internationale. From 1917 the League had been taking full-page advertisements in the nationalist press to insist that 'Scotland become again an independent nation, and that all lands, mines and fisheries be restored to the Scottish Commonwealth'.

Full pages were also taken to list the League's leadership, which by 1917 included office-bearers in Aboyne (Erskine of Marr), Durness (the Rev. Adam Gunn), Glasgow (the Rev. James Barr), Lochs (the Rev. Donald MacCallum), Coll (the Rev. Malcolm Morrison), Inverness (the Rev. A. MacLeod), and in London G. B. Clark and Willie Gillies (whose grandson would become professor of Celtic in Edinburgh University) There were further office-bearers listed for Caithness, Helmsdale, Stornoway, Tain, Reay, Rogart, Oban, North Uist, Lochganvich, Balalan, Tongue, Raasay, Kyleakin and Halladale. The objects to which the League subscribed were, 'to secure Autonomy for Scotland, the return to the people for their use and enjoyment of the land taken from them and now held in large areas by nobles and other landholders in the Highlands of Scotland'.

The 1918 election was held in the middle of December. The established parties made considerable play of the extent to which they were committed to land-reform. Although the Liberals, led by Asquith, managed just one word on land in their manifesto, Labour pledged to 'free the soil from Landlordism and Reaction', and promised that 'the Labour Party means to introduce large schemes of land reorganisation, and it is fully aware that they can only be done in the teeth of the most powerful vested interests. Land nationalisation is a vital necessity. The Land is the People's'.

The manifesto of the Coalition of Bonar Law and Lloyd George also announced grand intentions with regard to the land question. 'Plans have been prepared, and will be put into execution as soon as the new parliament assembles, whereby it will be the duty of public authorities and, if necessary, of the State itself, to acquire land on simple and economical bases for men who have served in

the war, either for cottages with gardens, allotments, or smallholdings as the applicants may desire and be suited for. In addition to this we intend to secure and to promote the further development and cultivation of allotments and smallholdings generally as far as they may be required in the public interest. Arrangements have been made whereby extensive afforestation and reclamation schemes may be entered upon without delay'.

Nevertheless, the League ran candidates under its own banner in Argyll (L. M. Weir), Inverness (G. J. Bruce), Ross and Cromarty (H. Munro), and the newly-created constituency of the Western Isles (H. MacCowan).

MacCowan, provost of Oban, was the nominee of the Stornoway branch of the Independent Labour Party, running with the blessing of the Highland Land League. But it was a sign of the times in the Western Isles that all three candidates there called for sweeping land-reform and a 'radical transformation of the land system'. And in Inverness-shire the League candidate G. J. Bruce took space on the front page of the Inverness Courier to present his programme in Gaelic. Bruce said that he had been born in a small bothy-type house to a poor crofter, the descendant of parents cleared from Strathnaver 'who had to find an exile overseas'. In 1913, he had succeeded in re-establishing the Land League, 'I fought relentlessly against the displacement of our people. Self Rule for Scotland, the Land for the People, and the People for the Land. The fruits of the threshing blade belong to all, and the land belongs no more to one than another'.

Bruce's advertisement did not prevent anti-League editorials in the Courier. But the paper did nevertheless report one of Bruce's meetings in the Town Hall (soon to be decorated with the 700

names of the parish dead). That report of his speech gives something of the flavour of the campaign.

‘He stood for the land for the people. He had brought with him the old blue banner that had floated so often in the great assemblages in the North, when they were out for the land for the people. It had been the banner of the Highland Land League. That league was responsible for originating the agitation which led to Scotland getting all the advances in land-reform it had obtained; but they must admit that the land laws had been almost a complete failure in securing the land for the people. That was proved by the last report of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland. In Inverness-shire in 1915, the total number of applicants for smallholdings was 1,339, and for enlargements 1,250, making a total of 2,589. How many did the Board of Agriculture get through? There had been granted 106 new holdings and 73 enlargements’.

That, Bruce thought, was failure and nothing else but failure. ‘At the outbreak of the war there were something like 8,400 applications for smallholdings in Scotland undealt with. Why should they have such vast acres of land for the blood sports of the autocrats who came to the Highlands for idle moments of each year? The present stampede election was one of the greatest scandals for which the government was responsible. Not more than sixty per cent of the soldiers would have any chance of voting. In the burgh of Inverness, 26 per cent of the voters were absent voters. In the county there were 5,000 absent voters. The Highland regiments that had a large share in winning the war were disenfranchised. And what about land for returning soldiers? Up to May last, provision had only got as far as settling 26 soldiers on the land; and the provision consisted of giving large sums to certain big

landlords for the most barren spot they could get hold of. He had in his blood a feeling of antipathy to the oppressors of the people'.

In the Western Isles campaign, the rhetoric was similar, though the vote was won by Donald Murray, the Liberal candidate, and a strong advocate of land-reform (as his parliamentary interventions would shortly demonstrate). He also enjoyed the support of the Stornoway Gazette, which may have helped: 'He is the local candidate, the first in the field, and the people's choice before any other from outside of the constituency was dreamed to be possible'.

On a turnout of 44 per cent of the electorate (presumably because many servicemen had not yet been demobilised), Murray took 47 per cent of the votes cast; the Land League candidate took just over ten per cent, or 809 votes. But Murray's election address had announced that 'he would press for a strong and effective scheme of land-reform which would result in a speedy distribution of all the available land in the Highlands and Islands among the people'. And certainly, over the next four years, he strongly supported land-raiding in the Hebrides, and became noted for his speeches in parliament on the issue of land-hunger.

In Inverness-shire too, the mainstream press favoured non-League candidates (perhaps because of the League's identification with Labour). The Inverness Courier denounced all the League candidates as extremist agitators and 'agents of the Inverness dockers'. In any case they all lost, despite winning a respectable share of the vote: Weir in Argyll getting 19 per cent on a 52 per cent turnout, G. J. Bruce getting 27 per cent on a 37 per cent turnout, and in Ross and Cromarty Munro taking 21 per cent on a 51 per cent turnout.

On a British scale Coalition candidates took 473 of the 707 seats in the Commons. In Scotland 54 of the 71 seats went to Coalition candidates. And in the Highlands Coalition Liberals had taken Argyll, Caithness and Sutherland, Inverness, Ross and Cromarty, and Orkney and Shetland. Their only upset was in the Western Isles, where Murray ran as a simple Liberal. In other words, Labour was still some years short of its national electoral breakthrough. Due to the circumstance of coalition government, it did better than ever on a British scale - and for the first time ever won more seats, at 57, than the Liberals at 38. But in the Highlands, in coalition form or not, the old hegemony of the Liberals held good.

But the wartime and immediate post-war land-raiding kept the land question firmly to the fore of Highland and Scottish politics. This was reflected, notably, in continuing criticism of the 1911 Small Landholders' Act. As early as the first month of the war, the Thistle had observed that, 'the maleficent hand of the landlords' influence in the fashioning of the Act in the House of Lords comes out strongly in the reports connected with the sittings of the Land Court. Claims of a serious and costly character are made by the landlords whose estates are interfered with by the Court for the purposes of settlement. The Bill as introduced by the Government was avowedly for the purpose of re-peopling the Highlands; a great public object before which the so-called landlords' rights should have been minimised to the uttermost. Instead of this they have been magnified to the uttermost. In one case lately reported a large sum, considerably over £2,000, was awarded by the arbiter for depreciation of sporting rights, on account of the settlement of crofters on a portion of the estate. And this sporting value did not arise from deer; but from the shooting of wild geese'.

By the end of 1916 the Land Court, in its fifth annual report, was regretting the manner in which the Act had been 'marred and mangled' by the ingenuity of landlords' legal agents appealing Land Court decisions to the Court of Session. These decisions had effectively destroyed the usefulness of the Act. The procedure for the creation of new holdings was 'complicated and expensive'. The limits of rent and area were 'so narrow, particularly for pastoral holdings, that this Court has had to refuse to authorise schemes for new holdings, excellent in themselves and for the public interest'. The statutory element of compensation to the landlord came in for particular criticism as the Act's 'most essential defect'; and the Land Court reported 'with great regret' that the compulsory provisions of the Act had been 'rendered practically unworkable by judicial interpretation of the clause which deals with compensation to the landlord'.

By the following year Forward was simply dismissing the Small Landholder's Act as 'The Landlord Protection Act' (printing in the same edition its own 'land programme for the Highlands'). The essential weakness of the Act was that it gave landowners whose land the Land Court ordered to be re-settled the right to claim compensation for disturbance of their 'sporting rights'. This in effect made it impossible to reclaim land from deer-forests, so huge could the claim for compensation be.

For the Thistle, the 'ignominious failure' and 'iniquitous terms' of the Act were proof of the 'disgraceful lengths to which landlordism was allowed to go' to prevent the settlement of the people on the land. 'This short-sighted and rapacious action of the landowning class gives us a warning as to popular action in the future. The settlement of the people on the land is one of the greatest domestic

questions that will come before the people when this cruel war is over and care will have to be taken that there shall be no more landowning juggling in the future. A strenuous attempt to do so will be made by the landowning and privileged classes. Of that there can be no doubt - and it must be resisted to the uttermost'.

And just three months from the end of the war, the Thistle was reporting on 'depopulation in Glenquaich', with the comment, 'while there is an Act of Parliament which is expressly designed to give a peaceful settlement in Scotland to men of the class of crofters and small agriculturalists, and that a considerable sum of public money has been spent in carrying out this policy, yet at the same time landowners in the Highland districts are permitted to carry out a policy of depopulation on portions of their estates'.

Even Lord Lovat thought the Small Landholders' Act a distinctly bad piece of legislation: 'It was bad in itself' (in other words, Lovat was implacably opposed to any state interference in the Highlands): 'It was not too wisely administered'; and, 'it failed from the very start'.

Post-war, therefore, against a background chorus of this sort of criticism, new legislation on land settlement was promoted. During the course of 1919, the Land Settlement (Scotland) Bill made its way through parliament. It was introduced there two days after the opening of the grouse-shooting season and the Scottish Secretary moved its second reading in the Commons the following day. Land and Liberty gave the debate no less than five pages of space.

There had been small-scale legislation on the land during the war. But the Land Settlement Act was altogether more ambitious in scale. Its central provisions were to amend and extend the

discredited 1911 Small Landholders' Act, 'to make further provision for the acquisition of land for the purposes of smallholdings and otherwise facilitate land settlement in Scotland'.

For Labour, the new proposals were 'a great advance on anything they had yet had in connection with land settlement'; while landlord opposition was strikingly muted. In the Commons, only two members for Highland constituencies spoke on the matter. From Argyll, Sir William Sutherland offered no major complaint. For the Western Isles, Dr. Murray complained that the proposals made no provision for land squatters (former raiders now established on land to which in law they had no rights); 'People in my constituency are getting impatient and are asking when they are going to get smallholdings'.

The Conservative George Younger (for Ayr Burghs) worried that 'the moment smallholdings are established on any property in Scotland the capital value of the estate is reduced'. Younger, whose family had made its fortune from selling cheap alcohol to the industrial working class, returned to this point in November, when the Bill was before the Scottish Grand Committee. It was proposed that compensation for acquired land would be paid on the basis of the agricultural value of the land, rather than its 'sporting' value. Younger wanted this provision deleted.

Betraying a hitherto undetected concern of the Scottish landowning class for equity and mercy, Younger thought that the proposal was unjust and ruthless: 'There were many natural deer-forests suitable only for sporting purposes and bringing in large rentals, which would be destroyed if smallholdings were created on or near [sic] them, and something ought to be done to mitigate the extreme loss in cases of this kind'.

But the landlords were markedly reticent in their criticism and they mounted no significant opposition to the passage of the Bill. In the Lords, Lovat contented himself with concern for the 'absolute power the Bill gives to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland practically to make bankrupt any unfortunate landowner in Northern Scotland who derives most of his revenue from sporting estates'.

However, for the Duke of Sutherland, with 300,000 acres to his name in the Highlands - as he reminded the peers - other considerations were uppermost. 'For 100 years the Highlands have from time to time seen a series of land agitations. They have died down only to rise again and to cause fresh unrest and trouble. Let us hope that this Bill, the fruit of a compromise [sic] with all parties, may be a way of laying that ghost which has haunted the Highland glens for so long. The Bill will go to another place and very probably returned in the form in which it was sent by us. A serious constitutional crisis might then arise'.

But it was not considerations of constitutionality that bothered Sutherland. It was simple fear of what might happen if the landlords did not concede something, for the echo of events in Russia had resounded beyond the modest confines of pier-head and clachan. They had resounded - most alarmingly - in the drawing-rooms of lodge and castle; and the drawing-rooms had sensed the old order shake, the old earth tremble.

That, at least, was perfectly clear from what Sutherland next told the House of Lords. 'We remember that it is only a short time ago and a few years before the war that in Scotland, at any rate in the Highlands of Scotland, the House of Lords was looked upon with anything but favour. It was considered to be the author of all tyrannical evil. We do not wish for a similar state of affairs at the

moment, when we should all be united against the evils of Bolshevism’.

Thus supported - if that is the right word - the bill received the royal assent the day before Christmas. Thirty-three years since the young David Lloyd George had listened to Michael Davitt and the Crofters’ MP G. B. Clark speak on the land question to the Welsh Land League among the grim slate screes of Blaenau Ffestiniog in north-west Wales, the state set about what it said was the re-settling of the Highlands.