

12. Avoid Lawyers, Continue Ploughing.

‘The great European war was finished in about four years and the British government through the Board of Agriculture has failed in about the same time to acquire small plots of land for those to whom they were promised. It is not time to end the farce?’

IN THE WAKE of the First World War, demand for land in the Highlands was as insistent as ever. And if anything, it was even more determined. In the words of one contemporary observer, ‘in the crofting counties the question is fairly simple and uniform. There is a definite demand for land to be satisfied and a definite purpose to be served. The agrarian question in these counties has been prominently before the public for at least a generation’. As a result, the land question was to occupy a prominent place on the political agenda in the years following the Armistice.

In this period Labour - on a British scale - at last moved steadily, and decisively, ahead of the Liberals. In the 1918 election the Coalition took 473 seats; but Labour, at 57, was well ahead of the Liberals’ 38. In 1922, however, when the Coalition had ended and the Conservatives took 344 seats and the Liberals 115, Labour had at last broken through to take 142 seats. The following year, Labour took 191 seats, putting it in a position to form a minority government. It lasted only a year. But though Labour fell back to 151 seats, the Liberals had crashed to 40 - the number of seats held by the Labour party in 1910!

Throughout these years the land question commanded attention on a British political scale. In 1922 Labour’s manifesto promised wide-ranging changes to the game laws, while the Liberals

promised 'a comprehensive reform of the existing land system, including Taxation and Rating of Land Values'. The following year the Liberals were demanding the development and encouragement of smallholdings, while Labour promised to 'restore to the people their lost rights in the land'. And by 1924 the Liberals were promising to 'secure to land workers the fruits of their energy and enterprise through a complete alteration in the system of land tenure'.

In the Highlands, meanwhile, the banner of radical, anti-landlord reform (carried in the 1918 general election by the Highland Land League in Argyll, Ross-shire, Inverness and the Western Isles) was borne by the Labour Party - though not with great electoral success. Still, Labour in Argyll took 35 per cent of the vote in 1920 (represented by the Rev. Malcolm MacCallum), and 23 per cent in 1924. In Inverness, Labour in 1923 and 1924 took respectively 35 per cent and 37 per cent of the vote. And in these same years the party's candidates took 24 per cent and 17 per cent in the Western Isles.

In a context where Labour had yet to establish itself fully as an enduring political force on the British stage, and where many Liberal candidates were strongly associated with land-reform, none of these performances was discreditable. And taken together they serve to indicate the extent to which the land question and associated issues remained central to the Highland agenda in the post-war period.

The radical and nationalist press did not fail to promote this centrality, either. By the autumn of 1921 *Land and Liberty* was reporting that one-fifth of the land area of Scotland was under deer-forests. The following year, the title covered in some detail the general election campaign in Inverness-shire. It reported with stern

glee that Cameron of Lochiel had urged his tenants not to vote for Murdoch MacDonald (the National Liberal candidate) unless 'he modifies his views on the taxation of land values'. Cameron's instructions occasioned an uproar in the Scottish press generally. And by 1923 *Land and Liberty* was reporting a Commons debate on the despatch to Edinburgh's Calton Gaol of land-raiders from Skye. One of the speakers in the debate was the recently-elected Thomas Johnston, founder of Forward.

Liberty, the 'Journal of Scottish Home Rule' as it styled itself, also campaigned steadily on the land question. In the spring of 1920 the paper was supporting the parliamentary candidacy in Argyll of the Rev. Malcolm MacCallum, and asking, 'Why are the Highlands the playground of the southern capitalist?' MacCallum also enjoyed the support of Forward, which reported his campaign under the stirring headlines of 'class war in the Highlands', and 'carrying the socialist message through far Argyll'.

That summer, *Liberty* also reported that the Highland Land League had 59 members in Coll on Lewis. And a month later, as the Highlands were convulsed with yet another outbreak of raiding and threats against landlords, the paper reported that a speaker from the London office of the League had addressed large May Day demonstrations in Chatham and Rochester on the subject of 'The Scottish Land Raids'.

Early the following year, *Liberty* reported the removal of the League's headquarters from London to Greenock. And in March 1921, as token of the continuing identification of land-reform with the Home Rule cause, it reported the inaugural meeting of the Scots National League. Speakers included Erskine of Marr, Willie Gillies and Angus MacDonald, president of the Land League. There was

further token that June, this time of the close relationship between land-reform and radicalism, when Willie Gillies wrote (of John MacLean): 'It is not without significance that with scarcely one exception the doughtiest opponents of capitalist rule throughout England's cracking Empire are men of Celtic blood and Gaelic name'. Throughout the remainder of that year, Liberty ran lengthy monthly reports on the doings of the Highland Land League.

Meanwhile Forward, as well as offering its usual diligent news reporting of land-agitation in the Highlands, continued to find space for theoretical pieces from long-term land-reformers like G. B. Clark, C. A. Paterson, and the Rev. Malcolm MacCallum. It also found space for an attack on the record of land-ownership in Morvern ('the Almighty of Lochaline'); and reported in extensive detail the attempts in the early 'twenties to introduce nationalisation-of-land bills in the House of Commons.

Of the gaoling of the Skye land-raiders, meanwhile, Forward reported in verse.

So Hurrah for the Highlands, the Sport Estate Highlands
Domain of the Nimrods from Piccadillee
The working-class vermin are fast disappearin'
The last of the clansmen in gaol at Portree.

The background to this extensive press and parliamentary attention was the continuing spate of raids in the immediate post-war period. As an official summary of the time indicates, seizures or threats of seizure of land were common from 1918 through to 1920. Incidents recorded include locations in Harris, Shetland, Tiree, Skye, Wester Ross, Sutherland, Caithness, and at various points on Lewis; while another fifty farms across the Highlands were under threat of imminent occupation.

A similar summary for 1922 details incidents at Forsinain in Sutherland, at Nunton in Benbecula, at Kilbride in Skye, at Newton in North Uist, at Strathaird in Skye, at Rodel in Harris, at Stimervay in Lewis, at Drimore in South Uist, at Galston in Lewis, at Pitcalnie in Ross-shire, at Scoor in Mull, at White Park in Islay, and at Glas Eilean in Harris.

In the Uists, for instance, the anti-landlord activities of groups of ex-servicemen drew extensive attention in parliament and the press. In North Uist by early 1920 a dozen men were threatening raids, and marching behind a piper from the local premises of the Great War Comrades' Association. And events at Balranald in South Uist were to draw appeals of support from public associations across the Highlands (and beyond). They included the North Argyll Liberal Association and British Legion branches in Inverness and Dumfries, among others.

At Balranald, thirteen men were involved. Of these, one had been four years overseas; a second disabled while in the army; a third four years overseas; a fourth overseas for a year; a fifth overseas for nearly three years; a sixth overseas and twice badly wounded; a seventh overseas and twice wounded; an eighth overseas and badly wounded; and a ninth overseas and wounded. All had been volunteers.

They had over some period of time been applying to the estate for land, and to the Board of Agriculture to take some action - but in each case without success. In November 1920, therefore, they marched to the landlords' house, headed by a piper, and told him that they were simply going to take his land the following day. As one of them recalled a full sixty years later, 'he got very excited about that, of course. But we told him to go to blazes and the next

morning we were on his land. We tipped over his carts, we rounded up his sheep and cattle and drove them away. It was a week after that had happened that we were served with a sheriff's interdict forbidding us to set foot on Balranald'.

The men had already written to the landlord in plainly uncompromising terms. 'We, the undersigned ex-servicemen, have decided to let your cattle have fourteen days in Paiblesgarry, but you must keep all sheep off it from now on'. And within a week of this missive, the Board of Agriculture was also told that 'thirteen ex-soldiers have now raided the said farm and are manuring the ground'. They had divided the land into equal shares and 'emphatically declared that they would not remove'. If any proceedings were taken against them, 'they were prepared to go to prison'.

A week later, the landlord was complaining to the authorities that others in the district were also getting ready to raid land; 'the crofters on the north side of the farm are just waiting developments and watching to see what action the Board are to take'. He feared that if things went on 'as at present', there would 'undoubtedly be another raid'.

As a result the men were taken to court, and sentenced to sixty days without the option of a fine (which would have been paid by supporters in any case). The authorities, however, perhaps fearing the effects of gaoling ex-servicemen, said there was no gaol accommodation available, and the men were released. Later, however, they were indeed gaoled: two of them being arrested while attending a Territorial Army training camp at Inverness (though the arrest nearly occasioned a riot in the town).

The conflict at Balranald, however, was not at an end. The following spring, an officer of the Board of Agriculture was writing to the Scottish Secretary to express his deep anxiety 'about the situation in the islands generally. There have been two fresh raids in the Lochmaddy district of North Uist this week and the situation calls for careful, firm and very speed action'. And on the same day the raiders themselves wrote to their anti-landlord Edinburgh lawyer Donald Shaw, offering to withdraw from the land on condition that the landlord did not work it. This, they warned, would start trouble again, as they were 'dead set on having the land and will have it if at all possible'. The secretary of the Highland Land League also pressed the Lord Advocate by letter on the case of the Balranald raiders.

There was continuing land-raiding elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands too, doubtless encouraged by the small burst of hunger and destitution that victory in the Empire's cause had brought to the populace as its prize. By the spring of 1920 the press was reporting food shortages, widespread distress and starving children on Skye: and by the autumn typhoid on Lewis. Unsurprisingly, these conditions were matched by a rash of land-raids in Sutherland and the Hebrides. The implications of these new raids did not go unnoticed. In August, while the Board of Agriculture was reported as being short of funds, the House of Lords discussed the now widespread land-raiding across the Highlands.

In 1922 there was yet more trouble in North Uist. Ex-servicemen from Berneray raided at Cheesebay, Lochportain and Newton farm. They wrote in a confident tone to the authorities with regard to their complaints. 'Please do not think we care one straw for threats of imprisonment, for apparently without additional

suffering to what we have had on the continent of Europe, our cause will not succeed. When facing the Germans we were filled with promises of getting land where and when we wanted, and now four years have elapsed but we are still left in the cold. The great European war was finished in about four years and the British government through the Board of Agriculture has failed in about the same time to acquire small plots of land for those to whom they were promised. Is it not time to end this farce?’

The Board responded with a threat that any land-raider in North Uist or elsewhere would be struck-off its list of prospective settlers. Raiding nevertheless continued across the Highlands. On Skye, land was seized at Kilbride by ex-servicemen from Torrin. At Christmas, 1920, the local Church of Scotland minister had warned the Board that a raid was being planned on a local farm. And the following April the farm in question, on the estate of Lord MacDonald, was duly raided. A full eighteen months later, however, no progress had been made by the Board in terms of making official the claims of the raiders.

As a result of this inaction, the raiders’ Edinburgh lawyer (again, Donald Shaw), wrote to the Scottish Secretary. With the exception of a few acres, he said, ‘the whole of the arable land on Kilbride has been out of cultivation for a number of years. All the men for whom I act are ex-servicemen. One of them had no fewer than four brothers fighting with him in France’.

The estate itself feared involvement in the dispute. But the tenant-farmer of Kilbride went to the Court of Session and gained an interim-interdict against the raiders. A sheriff-officer was, in time-honoured fashion, then deforced. And in the summer of 1923, five years after the Armistice, the village of Torrin was invaded at an

early hour: 'The arrest of two disabled ex-servicemen, it is understood, has arisen from a charge of alleged deforcement on the farm of Kilbride'.

By this point there had also been trouble in the west of Skye, where the demands for land were now so advanced that 'they could not be met under personal ownership'. MacLeod of MacLeod thought it wise to agree to sell land for crofter settlement in the parish of Bracadale, 'including the well-known farms of Talisker, Gesto, Drynoch, Ullinish and Oze'.

There was also a raid at Strathaird, with some cottars taking possession of Camusunary, and pegging out seven crofts. By March 1923, the raiders were still in possession of the land, refusing to leave, and facing court action charitably raised the previous Boxing Day. Their defence was that 'they were not in breach of moral law in laying claim to cultivate some of the lands held by their forefathers for centuries'. The men had served in the 51st Division and some of them had been badly wounded - 'it was only in despair of any action being taken to apply the law that they had in their suffering decided to occupy'. Thus they raided the deer-forest (the tenant of which lived in London for nine months of the year) and seized land 'that had at one time been under smallholders, who were subsequently removed'. Nevertheless, they were given two-month gaol sentences - though the public outcry was so great that they were released after ten days.

That same month three Broadford land-raiders were also facing court appearances. They too were all ex-servicemen. The first had been with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (the name deriving, of course, from the conjoined families of the dukes of Argyll and Sutherland). The second had been with the Seaforths and

badly wounded, and the third had 'lost' a leg at the Somme with the Black Watch. Still, they were ordered to appear before the courts in Edinburgh within a fortnight.

During this period, though raiding was particularly popular in the Western Isles, there was considerable direct action, or threats of it, on the mainland and in the inner Hebrides too. In Sutherland, trouble spots were identified at Forsinain, Farr, Blarich, Kirkton, Kinbrace and Cambusmore. From Ross-shire and western Inverness-shire they included Kishorn, Glenshiel and Coiliree, along with Arnisdale in Glenelg. From Argyll, they included Mishnish, Islay, Arinagour and Arnabost on Coll, Gometra and Fidden on Mull, and parts of Auchenreir, Fearnoch and Barnaline estates. There were also threats of land-seizure in Caithness, where the crofters were reportedly 'in revolt' at the farms of Latheron Mains and Latheronwheel Mains, at Charleston and at Knockglas. There was also a case in Perthshire (which did not fall within the terms of the original Crofters' Act), at Carwhim on the Breadalbane estates.

And in the early post-war years, there were two notable cases of determined land-raiding on Raasay, which was owned by William Baird, of the family which had once owned Knoydart. Baird's sporting tenant was one William Rowsley. The first of these raids began on 20 March 1920, when eight local men raided Raasay Home Farm in the vicinity of Raasay House. They had earlier been assured that they would get land; but tired of waiting for the Board to allocate it, the men simply staked out their claims, having by this point established for themselves the legal services of Donald Shaw.

The factor for Baird promptly applied to Portree sheriff court, successfully, for an interim interdict against the raiding. And a sub-commissioner for the Board of Agriculture at once informed the

Scottish Secretary that the 'attitude of the applicants is in my opinion utterly unreasonable. They should not receive the very least countenance from the authorities'. The sub-commissioner went on to identify the leader of the raid as John M. MacLeod, shoemaker, Raasay. 'He is very hostile towards the factor. I have no doubt he is the author of the raids and the principles of the raiders'.

But the shoemaker of Raasay was not to be intimidated by the courts, or collusive commissioners. MacLeod himself warned the Scottish Secretary by letter of the results of public meetings held on Raasay and Rona on the land question in both island. At these meetings, 'the criminal negligence of the Board was unanimously condemned. The inaction of the incompetent body is wholly responsible for land-seizures in Scotland, many of the applications for holdings having been sent to the Board years ago. The interdicts served on the raiders are strongly resented by the islanders, fifty per cent of the male population of which went willingly to the Great War alleged to have been in defence of liberty. At the meetings it was agreed that unless the requests for holdings are granted immediately, there will be forcible possession taken of all the available land in the island'.

This was not to be the end of the matter. In 1921, a group of men from Rona also warned the Board that its members would take the law into their own hands and make a general raid on both sheep and Home Farm on Raasay, 'which is for a number of years now let to a sporting English gentleman, who rears calves with the milk we should be getting for feeding our little children'.

Three months later, therefore, police reports from Portree were warning the authorities that men from Rona had lately been on Raasay measuring-out plots of land. The same report quoted the

factor as not regarding the matter as in any way serious. 'He does not think that the Rona men have any intention of taking forcible possession of the land. He rather thinks the matter is a piece of bluff on their part to spur on the Board of Agriculture to purchase the land for them'.

Within a week of this report, however, a raid had indeed gone ahead. As a result, an interdict was taken out, but ignored: and that July the raiders deliberately failed to answer a summons to appear in court in Portree on charges of breaching the interdict. The Chief Constable wired the Scottish Secretary in August, regretting that he had to report that 'though the officers got into touch with all the defenders, the latter would not listen to reason, showing plainly that they would resist any attempt to take them by force, finally dispersing in different directions and defying the officers'.

As a result, the Chief Constable prepared to deploy the fishery cruiser *Minna* in an assault on the land-raiders, along with the two dozen policemen he supposed necessary for such an attack. The raiders were to be seized from their beds in the middle of the night: taken to Portree during the remaining hours of darkness, 'without any person being aware of what was being done'; rushed quickly through an early court; and taken thence by the *Minna* (for the Chief Constable was confident that he knew in advance the decision of the court) to Kyle and gaol in Inverness 'with little demonstration or trouble'. The fishery authorities, however, refused point-blank to have anything to do with the suggestion of using their vessel in the attack. A late-night police assault was still mounted, however, and five of the men were thereafter gaoled for six weeks. A national outcry followed.

Petitions poured into the government from across Scotland (and beyond) from branches of the Comrades of the Great War Association and numerous trades-councils: among them, those of Montrose, Galashiels, Ealing, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Letters of protest arrived from, among others, the Highland Land League in Greenock. The wives and sisters of the gaoled raiders wrote to the monarch in Buckingham Palace with a covering note from MacLeod (written on one of his shoemaker's bill-headings). Raasay, they said, had once 'sustained in comparative comfort a large number of smallholders but was cleared many years ago to make room for sheep or deer'. Despite the harsh treatment of generations of islanders, however, the people on the outbreak of the Great War 'magnanimously forgot the injustices and insults heaped on their forefathers' and had joined the forces 'at a time when landlords found their title-deeds were of no avail in preserving their lands from danger'. Man, and not title-deeds, was 'the only hope then of the landlords!'

Inverness Trades Council demanded the release of the men. A fund was opened in the town for their dependents. A former front-line soldier with the Camerons wrote to the Inverness Courier: 'Apparently the holdings which parliament ordered for our landless cannot be obtained unless our people first submit to imprisonment. We want to hear no more in the Highlands of our 51st Division or any Division, after the insults suffered by those men for foolishly fighting for landlords. We thought we were fighting for our country, but now we find it was only for the landlords' country, and that when we claim any part of it we are directed to gaol. Monuments for the dead and gaol for the living!'

Even an officer of the Board noted that there was a growing feeling throughout the west that the only way to get land was to raid it. 'From everybody's point of view a stand should be taken against the idea that raiding can be undertaken not merely with impunity but as a sure means of achieving the raiders' ends'. The Raasay raiders, meanwhile, spurned offers of a deal with the Board. They wrote to the Board to that effect, via their lawyer, while they were still in gaol in Inverness, towards the end of 1921. They also wrote to the prime minister, stating their case.

Tiree, too, remained a hotbed of anti-landlordism in the wake of the Great War. Indeed, as early as the spring of 1918 - with the conclusion of the war by no means yet certain - the matter of land-hunger there was raised in the Commons. The Scottish Secretary was asked whether he was aware that the Duke of Argyll had taken proceedings to 'interdict crofters of Tiree from cultivating and producing food upon suitable but entirely idle land near their homes'; and, in view of the national food situation and the thousands of acres of suitable land lying unused by the Duke of Argyll's estates, whether he would 'take steps to enforce the cultivation of these areas under the Defence of the Realm Act'.

The reply was that the duke and one of his tenant farmers on the island had obtained perpetual interdict at Oban sheriff court, 'against certain cottars and others taking possession of the farm of Balephetrish and part of the farm of Kenovy, Tiree'. It was added that, in general, the government's agencies were 'making every effort by arranging for an increase in the food supply'.

The Board of Agriculture was also in touch with the authorities on the issue. In January the previous year - in other words, well in advance of the 1919 Land Settlement Act - applications had been

received for land on the farms of Balephetrish, Reef and Crosspool. As far back as 1913, obstruction on the part of the principal farming tenant and the landlord had set back a Board plan to create more crofts on the island. And by 1918 there were 219 applications for holdings and 70 for enlargements (although 69 and 27 respectively had by then been established).

The Board sent an officer to report at first hand on the 1918 raid. He reported that he had not put himself in the way of the raiders, and only met two of them. 'From these I gathered that the feeling of the raiders is very strong and that they are determined to persist in what they have begun. They declare that even if the law checks them they will, at the first opportunity, resume. When I was there the land had been broken at eight places. Not much ploughing had been done owing to bad weather, but they mean to push on. There is a good deal of wild talk about gaol, and about the support they expect to receive in Glasgow where they have many friends. They say that on their arrival in Glasgow they will be met with a sympathetic crowd, flags will be waved and there will be a general throw-down of tools. At ordinary times this might mean nothing, but with so much unrest it is difficult to foresee the result. I understand that they are backed by some strong Land League body. I heard casually that a wire has been received advising them to go on ploughing but to avoid lawyers. They feel that now is the time to obtain the land. There is a general movement in Tiree to get land. Personally, I do not think that they will be at peace until the farms of Balephetrish and Crosspool are taken for division'.

By early April, following the seizure of land at Balemartin, the authorities were being warned that the Highland Land League had resolved to do everything possible to help cottars engaged in food

production and who were threatened with arrest. At the same time, the League was organising very well-attended meetings on Tiree.

And later that month eight raiders were arrested and given ten days in gaol at Oban for having taken thirteen acres of land at Balephetrish. In the Commons, the Scottish Secretary was asked whether, 'it is intended to continue the persecution of these men who are only voicing the demand in Scotland for access to the land for those who desire it'.

The Oban police wired the prison commissioners to report that the sheriff had recommended that the men be treated as political prisoners and be allowed to wear their own clothes. The commissioners agreed, 'so long as the clothes are suitable'. Objections to the arrest of the raiders - most of whom were very old - poured in to the authorities: from the Highland Land League in Edinburgh and Greenock, from the Edinburgh Labour Party, and from the parliamentary committee of the Scottish Trades Union Congress. The raiders' lawyer, again Donald Shaw of Edinburgh, wrote about the case to Lloyd George in protest.

In due course the raiders were released - one day ahead of the end of their term, to allow them to catch the weekly steamer home at six in the morning, rather than having to spend six days in Oban doing nothing (as opposed to six days land-raiding on Tiree). An anonymous civil-servant scrawled on the memo requesting the early release: 'Yes. I suppose this is a land-agitation case'.

The gaol sentences had no effect on raiding on Tiree, and this continued throughout that last summer of war. The raiders complained that the crops they had planted on the raided land were being eaten by the tenant-farmer's sheep with the encouragement of the landlord. They also complained that the police had prevented

these sheep from being driven away. The matter of this police obstruction was duly raised in parliament, while the Cornaig division of the Highland Land League, based at Scarinish, complained bitterly about the matter to the Board of Agriculture.

That summer, with the last great offensive under way on the Western Front, one of the raiders wrote to the Highland Land Settlement Association, asking, 'Why don't they take the sheep who have destroyed our crops and put them in the firing line in France?'

And by August the following year, raids were again threatened at Crosspool. One of these prospective raiders briskly wrote to the Board: 'We have waited long enough and if steps are not taken by the Board soon, we shall take possession of Crosspool by the November term'. The Board replied that land would not be available for three years. And thus at Christmas 1919, sixteen ex-servicemen of the island were once again threatening action. One of their number wrote to the authorities: 'We have gathered together and made up our minds to divide the land ourselves - until you see your way to divide the land yourselves, according to promise. This is our last communication on the subject'. The following February, therefore, there was more raiding and assaults on Tiree.

And three years later, there was still further raiding. The Board was once more being warned, 'we are sorry that we are again forced to fight the land battle over again. But we want to notify the Board that we intend to enter and take possession of part of the farm of Cornaigmore in May'. The Scottish Secretary was also warned, 'the result is that we again must take the law into our own hands and enter the farm of Cornaigmore'.

And as late as 1926, a full forty years after the naval invasion of the island to arrest and gaol land-hungry raiders, there were again

threats on Cornaigmore. The Board said that the farm did not fall within the compulsory-purchase clauses of the 1919 Land Settlement Act and nothing could therefore be done about it. Nor would the Duke of Argyll voluntarily let it be divided. The Board, then, was warned: 'Nothing will induce these men to keep quiet till they get what they have a right to. All the farm is a waste ground, neither ploughed nor stocked for the last thirty years. How long is the Board going to allow that sort of thing while others are starving in the land of their birth?'

But most notable of the land-raiding incidents in the wake of the Great War were those associated with Lewis and Harris - then owned by the richly eccentric and vastly rich English soap-boiler William Lever, Lord Leverhulme. This man had acquired Lewis (ownership of Harris came later) towards the end of the Great War from Duncan Matheson; and with the island he had acquired a history of poverty, clearance, land-hunger, factorial oppression and forty-odd years of popular resistance to landlordism. One contemporary observer noted, 'Lewis and Harris suffer from literal congestion. The 30,000 people in Lewis (apart from 4,000 in Stornoway) live in 100 township villages round the coast of the island. In some respects Harris is worse off than Lewis. Harris has all its good land on the Atlantic side and on the Minch side the land is much more rocky. Yet it is among these rocks that the greater part of the population of Harris lives. What makes the situation worse in South Harris is that a great part of the machair grazing is not even in a sheep farm, but in a deer-forest - and in the height of summer the deer may be seen on the low ground, just as they may be in the deer park in Magdalen College'.

In any case, there were 'whisperings' of an 'impending change in the proprietorship of Lewis' by the closing weeks of 1917. In February 1918 Leverhulme, then aged sixty-five, formally took up ownership of the island. That July he visited it for the first time as owner. Before the summer was over he had joined the local lodge of the freemasons, and had been in 'frequent conversations with representative businessmen in Stornoway'. He had also captured the enthusiastic support of the Stornoway Gazette (launched the previous year) which found his coming 'like an inrush of fresh life to the island'.

(The Gazette remained a staunch supporter of Leverhulme during his time as owner. Liberty called it 'the journalistic flunkey of Lord Leverhulme', and 'that most contemptible and servile specimen of the English press which continues to crawl in our midst. To all intents and purposes it exists for the vain glorification of the new English proprietor of Lewis').

By the new year, Leverhulme was moving quickly. In January he was proposing ambitious development schemes for Lewis, while the following month he was negotiating for the purchase of South Harris from Lord Dunmore. He got possession of Harris that May for £36,000, thus becoming the second-largest landowner in Scotland after the Duke of Sutherland. By July, as token of the extent to which he had to all appearances settled in, he was gifting robes and regalia for the provost and magistrates of Stornoway, in respect, no doubt, of their civic roles.

But this apparent honeymoon was not to last long: and it would founder on the old question of the land. During the Great War over 6,000 Lewismen had served in uniform. The Lewis to which they returned contained 3,000 statutory crofts and their families,

along with 1,500 cottars and squatters and their families, as well as a number of deer-forests and tenanted farms.

The ex-servicemen expected to receive land - with some justice, given that the farm of Aignish had been broken-up into a dozen crofters' holdings by the former owner of the island in conjunction with the Congested Districts Board before the war, along with land at Uig on the west of Lewis. The Board of Agriculture had also scheduled four farms for sub-division before the outbreak of hostilities, and had applied to the Land Court for enforcement orders. But the war had put an end to these proceedings. Thus, 'very little land settlement' had been carried out in Lewis and Harris, 'which are the worst-off of all the congested districts'.

Leverhulme, however, quickly set his face against any sort of land settlement. To him, in a breathtaking failure to understand anything whatsoever about the community into which he had so grandly parachuted, it was 'irrelevant and a gross waste of public money'. Almost at once, then, he managed to split public opinion on the island - which, almost certainly, was his intention.

By March 1919, with the Liberal Robert Munro as Scottish Secretary, land-raiding on Lewis was under way again. The farm of Gress, in Back, was pegged-out and claimed. A month later, 'after the Communion services were over in the Back district' a number of former soldiers and sailors (the Scottish Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers had an active branch in the island) pegged-off smallholdings for themselves on the farm of Coll, also in Back.

By April, Leverhulme's representative was visiting the ex-soldiers and raising hopes which 'may well prove the dawn of the Lewis raiders' day of anticipation'. Within a fortnight, however, there

was further raiding at Ballalan. There, a 'large number of disappointed applicants, ex-soldiers, demobilised sailors and others' had taken possession of a tract of land 'suitable for smallholdings. Village planning at the different proposed new settlements, viz. Brenigil, Stromas and Aline, provides not only for the allotments being shared out, but sites for a school, church and cemetery'.

Four parties were now in play: Leverhulme with his money and plans to develop the island on the basis of industrial fisheries; the raiders, demanding the crofts they had been promised by politician and statute; many of the people of Lewis who were, not un-naturally, in favour of Leverhulme's schemes (though not, of necessity, opposed to the claims of the raiders, raiding, or land-settlement); and the Scottish Office.

The point at issue was Leverhulme's insistence that he would not countenance the break-up of farms which were needed - he claimed - to continue to provide milk for the island. For their part, the raiders were adamant that they had a right to the land. As one of them, Angus Graham of Coll, wrote to the Scottish Secretary: 'We trust that you will see the advisability of directing the Board of Agriculture to enforce here, without further delay, the Acts of Parliament passed for the relief of the landless. Our families have suffered and are suffering severely from bad housing and from want of milk [sic], potatoes and vegetables, while there are thousands of acres on all sides of us fit for cultivation, devoted to the rearing of sheep and game'.

According to Graham, Coll and Gress and a number of other extensive farms were entirely worked for the benefit of the landlord, while the raiders were unable to obtain a few acres for smallholdings. 'We are willing and have repeatedly offered to pay a

fair rent for the lands needed by us. Section nine of the Land Settlement Act of 1919 enacts - Where the Board are satisfied that there is a demand for smallholdings and that suitable land is available for that purpose, it shall be the duty of the Board to prepare a scheme for the constitution of one or more new holdings on such lands. So far as we are concerned the Board, for which you are responsible to Parliament, has not done its duty. Indeed, it has failed to make any provision for us. The Board cannot deny that we have satisfied them that there is a demand by us for smallholdings or that there is suitable land available here to meet our demand. You have now the responsibility of deciding whether or not we are to receive peaceable occupation of the lands required by us and to which by law we are entitled'.

The dispute continued into the following years, while Leverhulme's commitment to his proposed development of Lewis began to wane. That spring, no less a veteran of the crofters' struggles than the Rev. Donald MacCallum was supporting the Lewis raiders in *Forward*. Thomas Johnston also visited the raiders at Coll. So too did John MacLean. (Anticipating by half a century the strategic significance of the Cold War's Iceland Gap, he offered perhaps the most perceptive of all speculative comment on Leverhulme's entire adventure in Lewis: 'I am convinced that Leverhulme is preparing Lewis and Harris for the Navy in case of war with America. Britain controls Greenland: so that by this chain she would have a continuous sweep right across the north of the Atlantic to Canada').

In February, Coll and Gress were again raided; Leverhulme interdicted the raiders involved; the Scottish Trades Union Congress demanded a statement from the government with regard to its land-

settlement policy; and Leverhulme without warning suddenly withdrew from the contest - abandoning his plans to 'industrialise' Lewis. The bribe, in other words, had been withdrawn, and the multi-millionaire flounced off in a fit of wounded pique. Public meetings were held in every school on the island, at every one of which there was overwhelming support for a continuation of development. But the following year, with land agitation still ongoing, Leverhulme's schemes were at an end on the island.

He transferred his attentions to Harris, meanwhile offering every crofter in Lewis the free ownership of his or her croft. (Naturally, the offer was turned down. It would have meant taking the land outwith the provisions of the 1886 Crofters' Act, as subsequently amended, and outwith the protection of the Land Court). The following year, Leverhulme put Lewis on the market ('a sporting estate for tuppence an acre'). A year after that the distinguished savonnier was dead: and soon afterwards his expenditure on Harris was at an end too, with the island also up for sale.

On Harris the people had promised not to demand land, as long as Leverhulme's development plans were under way. At once, therefore, there was an outbreak of agitation. In the spring of 1926 the farm of Scaristaveg was raided. The next spring, following refusal to respect interdicts, the raiders were sentenced to eight weeks in gaol. Two of them were gaoled again at the end of the year; and as late as May 1929, two raiders were once more gaoled for four months. There were too in this period raids at Borge, Bosta and Tong.

There was also continuing agitation in Islay, Skye and Glenfinnan in Lochaber (where there was talk of a raid on the local

deer-forest); while in Lewis there were reports of resistance to evictions of cottars and land squatters at Carloway. And there were also complaints from the southern isles. 'The crofters of South Uist, Benbecula and Barra hold their land under the heartless dictatorship of the Trustees of the late Lady Gordon Cathcart. This landowner left a sum of money to assist in further clearances. The Trustees, following her own example, are determined to show she was right, for they use all the resources of modern terrorism to make the lives of the crofters as unbearable as possible'.

But throughout the 1920s there had been a slow process of land settlement, against a background of raids and steady emigration. Deer-forests remained a striking feature of Highland land use, as a 1922 government study found: and by the middle of the decade, three and a half million acres of Scotland were still under deer. So too was continuing emigration a prominent feature of Highland life. In the early spring of 1924, for instance, the British Columbian government was suggesting Queen Charlotte Islands as suitable for the settlement of Hebridean emigrants. Between July and November the previous year, around 55,000 people had left Scotland for north America.

By then, of course, the great post-war emigrations from Lewis had taken place. The *Metagama* had sailed. And with the *Bendigo* went one emigrant, by the name of MacKinnon, who said, according to the *Inverness Courier* that, 'he had become tired of waiting for a holding, for which he had made application as an ex-serviceman'.

To 'settlement' in Scotland, of course, the landlords had for many years been inveterately obstructive and avaricious in broadly equal proportion. In the Uists, the Cathcart estate continued to contest the settlement plans of the Board of Agriculture. On Tiree,

the Duke of Argyll did likewise. The island of Benbecula's 22,000 acres sustained a population of 1,200 on 233 crofts and the single farm of Nunton, itself running to just under 1,000 acres. By 1922, there were fifty-one applications for new holdings and thirty-four for enlargement of existing holdings. Delays had led to the farm being raided twice; but the Cathcart estate opposed its division on the grounds that (as in the case of Vatersay earlier) there was an inadequate water supply to it. The estate further argued that if the farm of Nunton was indeed to be divided, it should only be on the basis of the government buying the island in its entirety.

The same species of extortionate obstruction was evident on Mull, at the bidding of the Duke of Argyll, with regard to the Scoor farm. Similarly on Skye, where landlords would not consent to the formation of new crofts unless at prohibitive cost: 'Proceedings are impracticable on the grounds of expense owing to the existence of a mansion house and valuable sporting rights which would be rendered useless by the construction of smallholdings'. In other words, the cost of crofts was the purchase from public funds of the entire estate, at a price set - or over which veto was exercised - by the landlord.

Thus it is scarcely surprising that the process of re-settlement was slow. As early as the autumn of 1920, there was a total of 13,000 applicants for smallholdings throughout Scotland, of which 5,000 were from ex-servicemen. Of these, less than 400 had been selected for a holding and a much smaller number had actually been settled. The Inverness Courier noted, 'it is already apparent that the Land Settlement Act of 1919 is a failure as an adequate measure for settling even the approved 5,000'. And three years later the same paper was reporting that in Skye not one holding had yet been

formed in either of the congested districts of Sleat and Waternish: 'With very few exceptions all the new holdings wrung in recent years from landlordism have been the results of raids or threats of raids'.

And in the slow process of settlement, popular force or the threat of popular force was indeed the key component. On Harris, Kyles farm was finally settled in 1926. One official of the Board wrote, 'the need of the applicants for land is particularly pressing and unless early provision is made for them, they will doubtless take forcible possession'. Rodel Farm was settled in similar vein. In the words of another Board official, with regard to the purchase price demanded by the landlord, 'as this is well within our limits we can agree without any reference to the abject surrender to terrorism apparent in this application'.

Luskentyre was also broken up, under the same impetus. The authorities feared trouble, 'with consequent renewal of agitation and possible lawlessness and disorder. The King's Writ hardly runs in Harris and if land raiding starts, the situation will get out of hand. The money is being paid to buy off disorder'. A total of sixty-eight families were also resettled between 1923 and 1925 from Harris (and Lewis) at Portnalong in Skye, as a result of the Board of Agriculture having bought the North Talisker estate in 1921.

Slowly, therefore, throughout the 1920s, the work started by the Congested Districts Board pre-war began to be reflected in resettlement at the bidding of the Board of Agriculture. In Caithness, sixty-acre holdings were the norm: 'It can safely be claimed that in no county has a greater number of satisfactory land settlement schemes been carried out than in Caithness'.

In Barra, the Board of Agriculture bought and distributed Eoligarry, adding to the pre-war division of Vatersy by the CDB. In

1922, Raasay was acquired and the land distributed. In the Uists and Harris too, land settlement (or rather, land re-settlement) schemes went ahead, most of the land once under farms on cleared townships being returned to the people. In North Uist holdings were around twenty-five acres, exclusive of outrun and share in common grazings. On Tiree, the farms were finally turned over too, more than a third of the island's population winning a holding as a result. On Skye, where the CDB had earlier acquired Glendale and Kilmuir, the Board of Agriculture now took ownership of large tracts of the island around Loch Bracadale - adding over 50,000 acres in more than 200 new holdings.

In Sutherland, as well, a number of sheep farms were broken up and distributed. And in Lewis eight farms in the south-west of the island were dismembered - along with, in due course, those in the east of the island which had occasioned so much conflict and publicity in the immediate post-war years. From 1912 until the end of 1927, the Board had formed a total of 2,874 new holdings and 1,641 enlargements to holdings throughout Scotland. In the Highlands, those formed were notably in areas with a long record of determined anti-landlordism. As the 1928 report of the committee on land settlement in Scotland put it: 'The problem in the Highlands involves historical, racial, economic and social considerations. We are dealing with a community which has refused to acquiesce in any of the attempts to change the method of holding or using land which have been made in the last 150 years, and the legislature has been compelled to meet the claims it has made to be allowed to live its life in its own way'.

That year, the National Party of Scotland was formed, with a radical policy on the land. It was succeeded in 1934 by the Scottish

National Party. The president of each was Cunninghame Graham who had, back in the 1880s, been first president of the Scottish Labour Party.

And in the 1929 general election the Labour Party, with 287 seats, became the largest party in the House of Commons. The Conservatives took 260 and the Liberals 59. Labour Party candidates, on a Home Rule platform, took 24 per cent of the vote in Argyll; 45 per cent in Inverness; 41 per cent in Ross and Cromarty; and 32 per cent in the Western Isles. In each case, the candidate for the party with the largest number of seats had stood on a platform of 'the land for the people'.

John Murdoch and Alexander MacKenzie - among many others - would surely have approved.