4. The Road to Glendale.

‘They would geld a louse if it would rise in value by a farthing’.

FROM THE 1850s, driven by the popular experience of the best part of the previous century, landlord-centred conflict in the Highlands approached the threshold - although it was still at something of a distance - of a qualitatively new stage.

By the middle of this nineteenth century, the people had fought, and almost always lost, at a striking number of known locations: and may well have fought, and lost, at an un-counted and unknown number of others. By the 1850s the people had encountered and contested landlord might at Balnagowan, Rosskeen, Strathoykel (in the great ‘Year of the Sheep’), Kildonan, Culrain, Gruids, Achness, Borve, Durness, Glencalvie, Lochshell, Assynt and Sollas: as well as in the course of sundry hunger-riots and religious disturbances at other locations.

Most of these encounters and contests, as far as the record indicates, were in the eastern Highlands, while in later years the engine of opposition would find itself along the western seaboard and in the Hebrides. But even then anti-landlordism was no prerogative of the men and women of Ross and Sutherland, as the record of direct-action conflict in Harris and Lewis indicate.

And thus, on a general if yet uneven scale, the common people of the Highlands had, as the second half of the century opened, smelt something of the sweetness of success, touched the wheel of united popular action, and glimpsed the hot torch of publicity (albeit in a language that was not their own).

A long history of oppression had been matched, though not yet overcome, by a long history of resistance. In the course of this oppression and resistance, the makings of a tactical and strategic awareness had been laid, with a consciousness of the power of united action and co-ordinated leadership.

Centrally, such vision as the common people of the Highlands claimed with regard to the land was hardly more sophisticated (or fundamental) that the concept that they continued to occupy it in peace and with some sort of prosperity appropriate to their times. This was not, however, a vision that the landlord class was prepared to concede in any way whatsover. From the 1850s, therefore, the stage was set for an escalation of land-centred conflict in the Highlands. But there were still many defeats to come.

The first of these defeats occurred when Lord MacDonald determined to evict 600 impoverished tenants from Strathaird (lying to the west of Loch Slapin in Skye), so that their departure might make room for sheep. An officer who was sent with writs was deforced and ejected, however, and he reported subsequently that ‘the people will do all in their power to resist any number or force that may be brought against them’.

The sheriff demanded police and soldiers, but subtler suasion was readily to hand in the form of the Destitution Board. The Board informed the people that they would get no more relief should they persist in their turbulent attitudes. Thus encouraged by the prospect of state-sanctioned starvation, the people came to their senses and cleared themselves forthwith from the island.

But signs of discontent were to be observed in other parts of the Highlands. The previous year, James Loch had contested (and failed to win) the parliamentary seat of Wick. In the course of the

campaign he had been subject to loud and public abuse, while his agent considered the town to be ‘a den of radicalism under the rule of demagogues’.

At much the same time there was further trouble at Coigeach in wester Ross. Writs of removal were issued against the people involved, tenants of the Marquis of Stafford, but ‘they made a stout resistance, the women disarming about twenty policemen and sheriff-officers, burning the summonses in a heap, throwing their batons into the sea, and ducking the representatives of the law in a neighbouring pool’. The party of officials was then forced to return whence it had come without serving a single summons or evicting a single crofter.

Scott, the factor, had been warned not to approach Coigeach by road, ‘so hostile are the inhabitants of Ullapool and surrounding country’. Instead, therefore, he went by boat across Loch Broom, from which loch the Hector had sailed for Canada in the previous century. ‘Some scores of women dragged the boat up the face of the hill for about 200 yards from the water, one man sitting in it, the whole cheering them on, and placed it high and dry in front of the inn’. Scott wrote to the marquis that the whole thing was ‘a distinguished triumph of brute force over law and order’, and added that while such ‘mob-rule’ continued in the ascendant, ‘the rights of proprietors must remain in abeyance’. Or, to express the matter in another way, the rights of indigents had at last overcome the brute force of factor and proprietor (and law-court) to which they had so long been subject.

More significantly, however, no further attempts were made to evict the people: and thus Coigeach must be counted as one of the

first, unequivocal victories in the long record of landlord-centred conflict in the Highlands.

In Skye, meanwhile, the following year witnessed evictions in Suisnish and Boreraig, with Lord MacDonald's trustees removing 120 families to make way for a sheep farm and explaining that the people had been 'steadily retrograding', and that the landlord had been 'over-indulgent'. According to Donald Ross, an eye-witness of the evictions, MacDonald's debts by this time were such that his creditors had appointed trustees over his lands. The lands were entailed and could not therefore be sold, and the purpose of these trustees was to 'intercept certain portions of the rent', in payment of the debt: 'The tenants of Suisnish and Boreraig were the descendants of a long line of peasantry on the MacDonald estates, and were remarkable for their patience, loyalty, and general good conduct'.

That spring they were nevertheless warned to get out of their holdings. They petitioned for a reversal of the demand. The reply came that in due course they could have other lands, on another part of the estate - part of a barren moor, unfit for cultivation. And so, 'in the middle of September following, Lord MacDonald's ground-officer, with a body of constables, arrived, and at once proceeded to eject, in the most heartless manner, the whole population, numbering thirty two families, and that at a period when the able-bodied male members of the familes were away from home trying to earn something by which to pay their rents, and help carry their families through the coming winter'.

The people were thrown out of their houses, their meagre belongings tumbled after them, and the doors of their huts nailed up. According to the Inverness Advertiser's long report of the

proceedings, the eviction had been, 'one of a fearful series of ejections now being carried through in the Highlands. Here were thirty-two families, averaging four members each, from 130 to 150 in all, driven out from their houses. But it was the will of Lord MacDonald - he has driven the miserable inhabitants out to the barren heaths and wet mosses. He has come with the force of the civil power to dispossess them, and make way for sheep and cattle'.

Three men later appeared before the Justiciary Court in Inverness in connection with these evictions, all charged with deforcement, having first been imprisoned at Portree. The accused, however, enjoyed a sympathetic jury which found them not guilty. They returned to what was left of their homes. Still, at the end of December the factor came again and threw them out, to live in the open or under such shelter as they could find for themselves. Eighteen of them were still there the following spring; but by the summer they had all gone, and MacDonald's trustees had the place to themselves and their sheep.

And worse was to follow, on Knoydart. At the same time as the events at Suisnish and Boreraig, Knoydart was being cleared in a savage manner. A year earlier Aeneas MacDonnell, owner of the Glengarry estate, had died and the administration of his lands had passed to his widow and his young son's trustees - along with a mountain of debt. As usual, the tenants were to be made to pay for it, and though they themselves were in debt to the estate, due to the effect of the potato famine of the previous decade, their debt amounted to a small sum by their standards and an extremely tiny one by the standards of the trustees.

This indebtedness, however, served as an excuse to remove them and replace them with sheep. A petition that they be allowed

to remain was rejected out of hand. That summer a government transport ship, the Sillery, was summoned to Isle Ornsay, across the sound of Sleat and just a mile or two to the north of MacDonald's castle at Armadale. Her boats were sent across the sound to take the people away. 'From house to house, from hut to hut, from barn to barn, the factor and his menials proceeded carrying on the work of demolition, until there was scarcely a habitation left standing in the district. No voice could be heard. Those who refused to go aboard the Sillery were in hiding among the rocks and caves'.

For a while some natives did manage to remain in Knoydart. But two years later, when the estate was sold to a southern iron magnate by the name of Baird, almost all of Knoydart was under sheep, and only a dozen or so impoverished 'clansmen' and their families held off starvation with the shellfish to be scavenged along the shores of the sound of Sleat.

But the meaning of the events at Knoydart may not have been lost on the wider Highland community: and just one year later there was serious trouble at Greenyards, on the other side of the country. Fierce violence accompanied a riot (and two survivors of the violence were alive and passing on their story in the early years of the twentieth century, to a man who was still alive to relate their tale as late as 1981).

For some weeks, the rumour had circulated in the district that four tenants of Robertson of Kindeace were to be evicted. The people, many of whom would of course have recalled the Culrain riot of 1820, decided on united resistance. In March, when the sheriff-officer came, he and his assistants were stopped and deforced. The Inverness Courier had already warned that 'considerable obstruction was anticipated in the execution of the summonses of removal' upon

the tenants, and the affair indeed turned out to be ‘of a very formidable character’.

The sheriff, several sheriff-officers, and thirty policemen from the forces of Ross and Inverness had marched from Tain. ‘On arriving at Greenyards, which is nearly four miles from Bonar Bridge, it was found that about three hundred persons, fully two-thirds of whom were women, had assembled from the country round about, all apparently prepared to resist the execution of the law. The women stood in front, armed with stones, and the men occupied the background, all, or nearly all, furnished with sticks’.

By seven in the morning, each party confronted the other. A riot then ensured, with twenty women seriously injured by the batons and boots of the police. One woman died later: two at least bore thereafter on the bodies, until very old age, the marks and crippling effects of the violence inflicted on them that day. According to the Courier, ‘the feeling of indignation is so strong against the manner in which the constables have acted that I fully believe the life of any stranger, if he were supposed to an officer of the law, would not be worth twopence in the district’.

The courts therefore took a severe view of the affair. That September, an Ann Ross and a Peter Ross appeared in Inverness before Lord Justice Hope (who had just spent the shooting-season on his estate in Sutherland). The Greenyards accused got twelve and eighteen months respectively, and a lecture from the bench on the wickedness of rebellion, along with a general warning on the need to suppress it.

And the law was called on shortly afterwards too, when in 1856 Lord Saltoun of Ness Castle attempted to evict thirty-two

people from what they saw as their land in the cause of establishing a pheasant-preserve. Trouble followed.

By now, however, developments in the wider world had served to strengthen the crofters' cause; or were, at least, beginning to do so. Patrick Sellar - 'Sellar of Ardtornish' as he became - was already dead; and if his passing was mourned, there were few tenants left in Morvern to be part of it, tumultuous quantities of free whisky or not. Within a couple of years, James Loch was also finally gone. (Years later, it was reported by one traveller in Sutherland at the time that on every hand he heard the urgent and exultant whisper, over and again - 'did you hear the news? Loch is dead, Loch is dead!')

The landlords nevertheless continued to conduct their affairs in the established manner of whimsical tyranny at the expense of the tenantry. On Skye, for instance, the standard method of maintaining a proper degree of discipline between the classes was a summons for eviction for rent arrears, rather than a civil-action small-debt claim. And again, when a tenant was removed for non-payment of rent, the estate required that any new tenant take-over the crippling responsibility for the previous tenant's debt-burden.

The collection of seaweed for use as fertiliser was also reserved as an estate-right, infringement of which could lead to eviction; while the rights of deer-stalking sportsmen were superior to those of crofters, who in some places across the Highlands were forbidden even to keep dogs for fear that they might disturb the deer. And in Lewis, crofting tenants would be fined for failing to remove their caps in the presence of the factor.

But by the 1850s, new pressures were ready to come to the fore in Highland affairs. The 1843 split in the ranks of the Church of

Scotland had already helped alienate tenants from gentry in many parts of the Highlands, the latter remaining largely faithful to the old church, the former deserting it for the Free Church. The effects of this Disruption were to give organisational expression to the alienation, and serve as a focus for it - not least on account of the landlords' response to it. In Strontian, for instance, where the people were denied a site for their new church by the landlord, they built one on a raft floating on Loch Sunart: while on Skye Lord MacDonald would not make any land available to the Snizort, Kilmuir and Portree congregations, who for years were required to hold their services in the open air.

A religious revival in the 1850s also offered the community its own recognised and independent leaders, albeit in a form that was neither overtly secular nor political; while the development of railways and steamship services (and in due course the telegraph) served to facilitate seasonal migration to the south for employment, and can only have had the effect of widening the horizons of the crofting villages of the Highlands. Fishing also brought Highlanders to Ireland, where much was to be learned about the brisk style of the Irish in their own opposition to English landlordism.

These years also witnessed the development of a Gaelic movement in the south of Scotland, allied to the development of interest in Gaelic culture at both a popular and academic level. There was also a marked growth in city-based societies composed of Highlanders, particularly during the 1860s and 1870s. Glasgow alone was host to regular meetings of the Sutherlandshire Association, founded in 1860; the Skye Association, founded in 1865; the Tiree Association, founded in 1870; the Lewis Association, founded in 1876; the Mull and Iona Association; the Ross-shire

Association; the Islay Association; the Lochaber Society; the Appin Society; the Coll Society; and the Ardnamurchan, Morvern and Sunart Association.

And the formation of the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1871 was followed by the establishment of similar groups in Glasgow, Greenock, Aberdeen and Dundee, between them pushing for the teaching of Gaelic in the schools, and for the foundation of a chair of Celtic at Edinburgh University. Indeed, it was in 1877 that the Gaelic Society of Inverness first petitioned parliament for a royal commission into the Highand land question; and the next year, the Federation of Celtic Societies was formed. Very quickly indeed, it became a powerful clearing-house for land-agitation matters.

These societies, or their activists, brought the question of the Highlands before a wider audience too. A Society of Highlanders was formed in Liverpool in November, 1880, following a discussion of the land question; the Highlander newspaper reported that 'the meeting was one of the most enthusiastic ever held in Liverpool, the prevailing tone being no compromise with feudalism or eviction'. The same edition of the paper announced, 'Mr. Murdoch, editor of the Highlander, reports great interest in the Highland land question in Bolton and Manchester, which he has just visited'. And later that month, the paper was reporting that 'the Liverpool Argus has been giving forcible support to the land claims of the Highlanders'.

Indeed, the printing press was to be an important factor in the coming years of landlord-centred conflict. As the turn-of-the-century press had publicised events in Sutherland, so by the middle of the century the Inverness Courier was recording the wider world of Highland affairs. In 1856 it was joined by the Invergordon Times, which in due course proved to be perhaps the most outspoken of all

regional papers in promoting the popular cause, along with the Ross-shire Journal, dating from 1875. The Oban Times would also be a strong advocate of the crofters, while the North British Daily Mail would chronicle on a daily basis the agitation of the 1880s and later; as did the Scotsman, though from an anti-tenant point of view.

Alexander MacKenzie's Celtic Magazine and later Scottish Highlander seldom failed to keep the landlord question in the public eye, either. And throughout the 1870s, John Murdoch's Highlander campaigned strongly on the land and related questions. As Murdoch later recorded in his autobiography: 'From the first my aim was to have a high-toned journal and to let Highlanders feel as much as possible that [it] was an espousement of their views, feelings and hopes'.

The scrutiny of a pro-crofter press doubtless served as something of a disincentive to the earlier style of full-blooded clearing on the part of the landlords: but a trickle of eviction and resistance continued to flow through the 1860s and 1870s. On the last day of September 1873, for instance, a Tiree widow by name of MacFarlane was found guilty at a court in Tobermory. The previous month she had defended her house with fire-tongs against eviction, 'in the process injuring one of her evictors', as Murdoch's Highlander reported with scarcely-concealed glee. There were doubtless many similar incidents, un-noticed in the wider world, and never reported.

But the spirit of anti-landlordism was soon to surface publicly and spectacularly on the island of Bernera off the west coast of Lewis, as a 'significant and expressive overture' to the even greater battles to come.

The island was part of the estate of Sir James Matheson, an opium-dealer and self-made millionaire in the Victorian mould. He

had acquired Lewis in 1844 for around £200,000 from the representatives of the last Earl of Seaforth. Under his ownership, the rental had almost doubled in thirty years, to £24,000.

The dispute on Bernera centred on the conduct of the landlord's factor. As one witness would recall in June 1883, 'my firm conviction is that his policy from the first day of his factorship to the last was to extirpate the Lewis people so far as he could'. The factor, Donald Munro, was also the senior legal officer on Lewis, not to mention the occupier of at least sixteen other posts in public administration. He was, in other words, an extremely powerful man, given to threatening eviction for any tenant who might be incautious enough to leave his hands in his pockets, or cap on head, when Munro was about: and also given to fining tenants on account of an allegedly unwashed face.

The factor of any estate, of course, was seldom a popular figure. At the funeral of one Lewis factor, who had choked to death on a lump of meat, one of the crofters hired to work the burial spade was heard to comment: 'Heap it on him, heap it on him! It's him that would have heaped it upon us, and if he but rise again, he will heap the more on us'. And a few years later, following Cameron of Lochiel's winning of a parliamentary seat, it was noted that during the speech of the losing candidate there were cries from the crowd that the landlord's victory had been engineered by the factors.

But on Lewis in 1874 Munro - and his master Matheson - walked into full-scale resistance. The dispute arose with regard to a summer grazing on the mainland of Lewis used by the Bernera people, which the estate now proposed to deny them the use of. Protests followed; and the factor threatened to mobilise the volunteer militia in Stornoway (of which he was commanding officer),

warning that the people would all be evicted from their homes for the temerity of protesting (though none was in arrears of rent).

In March a sheriff-officer, along with a sub-factor and one other assistant, arrived on Bernera and began to serve fifty-eight notices to quit. That evening the sheriff-officer was verbally assaulted by children; and the following morning he and his party were somewhat more robustly accosted by a crowd of about fourteen men. In the scuffle that followed, the coat of the sheriff-officer was torn - certainly an act of dangerous sedition given the social conditions of Lewis at the time. Three men were charged and given notice that they would shortly be required to appear in court. Prior to this appearance, however, one of the three men was spotted in Stornoway, the island capital, and arrested just a few hundred yards from the police station. But the intervention of a crowd of local sympathisers meant that it took the police four hours to make the journey to their station: while the sheriff was meantime sent for to read the Riot Act.

One hundred and thirty men then marched from Bernera (no mean feat in a Lewis spring) to effect the release of the arrested man, armed with such implements as were available to them, and headed by a piper. The prisoner, however, was released before any violence could take place. The procession sent instead a deputation to Sir James at the castle - where he simply claimed that he knew nothing about the eviction schemes on Bernera.

In July the three accused appeared in court in Stornoway, charged that they in March had ‘wickedly and feloniously attacked and assaulted’ one of the factor’s agents - and the stage might well have been thought ready for yet another popular defeat at the hands of the law. From the viewpoint of the authorities, the likelihood of

conviction was strong. The common people had never won a land-centred dispute in a Highland court, and there was little to suggest that they would win this one either. For the authorities, therefore, the outcome of the trial must have seemed certain: conviction, exemplary sentences, some further police work, collapse of opposition, and implementation of estate policy.

The trial of the Bernera people, however, did not run to plan - and its results can only have had an extraordinary effect on popular anti-landlord consciousness across the Highlands when the result became known (as it would have, no doubt, with very great rapidity).

The Bernera men pleaded not guilty. The factor, Munro, was the first witness. To the delight of the packed public gallery, he was cleverly examined by the lawyer for the accused, Charles Innes of Inverness. Munro was not a good witness. He had difficulty in remembering all of the many posts he held in the administration of Lewis. Nor did he know how many people he was attempting to evict from Bernera: such things, he said, he left to his subordinates as he was a very busy man. He had not (so he claimed, at least) consulted Sir James Matheson about the proposed removals, either: he was not 'in the habit of consulting Sir James about every little detail connected with the management of the estate'.

As Innes told the court, 'Had he either been in Connaught or Munster, Munro would long ago have licked the dust that he had for many years made the poor people of Lewis to swallow' - a reference, or implication, that a full century later would be considered extremely daring in a Scottish court. The men were acquitted: while soon afterwards, the sheriff-officer himself was charged with assault on one of the Bernera men, found guilty, and fined.

That, in effect, was the end of Munro - he progressively lost all of his posts, finally being dismissed as factor. It was also a tremendously significant victory for the cause of the common people of the Highlands, and was widely reported as such. The notices of eviction were allowed to lapse. In other words, the estate had surrendered - as it would soon afterwards with the people of Ness, from whose widows Munro had for years withheld publicly-raised monies deriving from a fishing-tragedy fund established during the 1860s, in lieu of alleged rent-arrears.

Munro's departure, of course, did not solve the land question in the island. As the Highlander noted, 'the central problem still remains that the land is badly distributed. In Uig one half of the parish has only eight families, while in the other half one hundred families are so pinched for land that they have to toil on sea as well as on land to eke out a poor existence'.

Nevertheless, the departure of Munro signalled a major setback for landlord power, and one all the more significant in that it was the first of such popular successes.

More were quickly to follow. On the mainland, trouble was soon brewing on the estate of Leckmelm on Lochbroom, which had been bought for £19,000 by an Aberdeen paper-maker Pirie from Colonel Davidson of Tulloch. Pirie had at once demanded that all the tenants on the estate surrender their stock to him at valuation prices and become his employees: or face eviction. A storm of publicity followed, with little of it favourable to Pirie. The local Free Church minister circulated letters to every newspaper in the north of Scotland about the threatened evictions. Charles Fraser-MacIntosh, MP for Inverness, raised the issue of Leckmelm in the Commons, and the Home Secretary was drawn into the matter. Every

newspaper, with the exception of the pro-landlord Scotsman, was unremittingly hostile to Pirie's demands.

Murdoch's Highlander reported events at Leckmelm across three of its sternly tombstone columns, and editorialised that the name of Leckmelm was becoming a by-word for 'iniquitous evictions'. In an expression that must surely have had an ominous ring for such of the landlord class as read the paper, it added, 'our Irish cousins are using a way of their own to rid their part of the earth of oppressors. Who can blame them?'

As a result of the Leckmelm controversy, Murdoch felt able to assert that 'the land question is now felt to be the leading question of the day'. Many landowners, the paper thought, must be cursing Pirie for creating so much discussion and helping so much to 'ripen' the land question. It was a question given extra piquancy by a report in that same issue that Gordon of Cluny, owner of the southern Hebrides, has been recently suggesting that his tenants there should 'have the opportunity of improving their position by emigrating to America' - the landlord offering to provide financial assistance to get them there.

That November too, the Highlander gave almost seven columns to a speech in Inverness by the Rev. John MacMillan of Ullapool, on the subject of the Leckmelm evictions. The paper thanked him 'for setting the clergy a-going on the land question'.

In Skye there was trouble, almost at once, at Valtos on the Kilmuir estate. The estate was owned by Captain William Fraser, from Nairnshire, who had bought its 46,000 acres from Lord MacDonald in 1855, and who had since set out to rack-rent his tenantry along the Irish model. Under his ownership, rental income from most tenants had almost doubled, though there had been a

substantial lessening in the quantity of land available for their use. Some rents had increased by almost three times.

In 1877, the Scotsman had reported widespread dissatisfaction with Fraser's regime in Kilmuir. In the same year a storm of wind and rain had swept the estate, flooding the Conan and Hinnisdale rivers, 'carrying away bridges, obliterating crops, sweeping flocks of sheep into the sea, and entirely changing the face of the country'. More to the point, the floods also wrecked Fraser's lodge at Uig. While his estate manager was drowned, the nearby graveyard was washed-out and bodies carried into the gardens of the lodge.

With their usual editorial genius the Highlander's news-pages spotted a theological angle to these events, and reported, 'the belief is common throughout the parish that the disaster is a judgement on Captain Fraser's property. It is very remarkable, it is said, that all the destruction in Skye should be on his estate. What looks so singular is that two rivers should break though every barrier and aim at Captain Fraser's house. Again, it is strange that nearly all the dead buried in Uig in the last five hundred years should be brought up as it were against his house, as if the dead in their graves rose to perform the work of vengeance which the living had not the spirit to execute. But though the living would not put forth a hand against the laird, they do not hesitate to express their regret that the proprietor was not in the place of the manager when he was swept away'.

In 1881, some of Fraser's tenants at Valtos defiantly refused to pay the rents, as they had been increased since his arrival on the Kilmuir estate. This rent-strike was followed by a petition asking for a rent reduction: which petition was promptly refused, and those

who had put their names to it threatened with eviction. The strike followed. Without explanation, the estate suddenly reduced rents by twenty-five per cent in Valtos and Elishader. As Alexander MacDonald later reported, 'that was the beginning of it' - by which he meant the beginning of a generalised agitation on the land question across the island, and soon the Highlands, as a whole.

Taken together, the events and their results at Bernera, Leckmelm and Valtos did indeed suggest the start of a qualitatively-new and generalised stage of land-centred conflict in the Highlands: not least in the degree to which events there were attracting attention on an increasingly wide scale. For instance, a mass meeting in Glasgow's City Hall, called to condemn landlord action at Valtos, was publicised by Murdoch's Highlander in that spirit; while among the speakers was the Irish nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell. But the first major shot fired in this generalised agitation was to be at Glendale, on the west coast of Skye, towards the end of 1881 and continuing into the following year.

For the first time in the record of Highland resistance, anti-landlordism at Glendale combined fundamental tactics - rent-strike, land-occupation, deforcement and refusal to recognise court orders - with wide publicity, a keen and informed sense of the protesters' own case, and above all a sense of organisation that would serve to carry their cause from the end of 1881 right through the following year.

Glendale, towards the end of 1881, comprised two estates: the 5,000 acre Husabost estate in the ownership of the eighty-year old Dr. Nicol Martin; and the 35,000 acre estate of Glendale proper, in the ownership of the trustees of Sir John MacPherson MacLeod. Sir John had acquired the land in the early 1850s, from the

impoverished MacLeod of Dunvegan. Since that time, conditions had been harsh for the tenants of the district in a number of ways. When the Napier Commission came to the glen two years later, the assurance was required on a number of occasions that no tenant would be victimised by speaking before it.

This may not have been surprising, given the views of Dr. Martin before the same commission on what he identified as the 'extravagance' of the tenants, for whose impoverished conditions he saw no remedy but emigration. 'I don't see how the land can be improved. The only remedy, I think, for them is to go where they can get land - that is, America. Go to Manitoba and various parts of America'. A mass departure he thought best for Skye, and it was one for which the landlords would pay.

From the tenants themselves, of course, there was a different intepretation on offer, with a whole series of witnesses relating their conditions and grievances. John MacPherson, by 1883 nationally known as the Glendale Martyr, spoke to the commission at some length on housing conditions; 'of the twenty crofters' houses there are only two in which the cattle are not under the same roof with the family'.

What MacPherson wanted was, 'the land, as there is plenty of it'. And as to payment for it, 'my father, my grandfather and my great grandfather have already paid in money far more than the value of the land'. When they had asked the landlords of Glendale for more land, MacPherson said, they had been told to be patient. 'We told them that our forefathers had died in good patience, and that we ourselves had been waiting in patience till now, and that we could wait no longer - that they never got anything by their patience, but constantly getting worse'.

One of the commissioners, in a question that reveals the extent to which the authorities expected a deferent tenantry on Skye, wanted to know whether MacPherson's manners on this occasion had been, 'civil, such as Highlanders are accustomed to use in talking to those of superior soclal station'. MacPherson said they were, but noted objection to the suitability of the factor, on the grounds that 'he does not speak our language, and many of us cannot speak English'. As to subsidised emigration, MacPherson thought that it would be 'more satisfactory to the people if the money should be spend at home, and when the land at home should be peopled, then to send us away to other countries'.

MacPherson added that it would be a 'capital thing' for the island's small population of large farmers - 'those who have the £1,800 tacks' - to emigrate. But as for the emigration of his own people, 'at present we see no reason for it, as there is plenty of land in our country, and I don't know how we don't get it; this is not our kingdom, we have nothing where we are'.

According to MacPherson, 'We are not home scarcely a week with our earnings when we pay it over to the proprietors, and they are off to London and elsewhere abroad to spend it, and not a penny of it is spent on the place for which the rent is paid. [There is] better justice in the south than in the north. There are two sides to the law; but we never saw the just side, always the worst side. I know that many of our landlords never purchased the properties with their own blood and that, therefore, we have as much right as anyone to have it by purchase'.

The points made by MacPherson were not, of course, new. They had been made in one form or another for the previous century. But their significance was the extent to which they can be

seen to represent a typical version of what the Napier Commission was to hear across the Highlands - and the extent to which they won unprecedented publicity.

In a long statement from the tenants of Boreraig, Alexander MacKenzie presented similar grievances, encapsulating the poverty, overcrowding and tyranny of conditions in Glendale. 'We complain generally of the smallness of our crofts, the want of hill pasture, that we are too highly rented. Forty five years ago our proprietor sub-divided and cut-up our twelve crofts into twenty-four different small lots and raised the rent. When the former crofts were cut up into small lots tenants were brought from Waternish and Bracadale for them, and all were crowded together in this little township. The land, having been in perpetual cultivation for hundreds of years, is becoming so poor and so much reduced that it is incapable of yielding any crop except of the very poorest. The result is that we are forever sunk in debt, and have to spend the greater part of the year away from home to earn money to buy food for our families, and to pay the rent for the landlord. If the people did not work as hard as he wished, or were absent for a day, he would threaten them with eviction. There is plenty of land in Skye for all the people in it, and that land which originally belonged to our own forefathers'.

Not only were the delegates from the people of Glendale before the Napier Commission articulate and clear in their opinions. They also presented a list of demands, which indicates a significant degree of prior discussion of their grievances. These grievances included more land, security of tenure, and compensation for improvement.

As a result of such conditions and demands, the people of Glendale were ready to go on the offensive by the closing months of

1881. And almost at once they were goaded into action by a warning notice displayed by the landlords at the local post office, with regard to the former right of the people to collect drift-timber on the seashore for their own purposes. This warning was reported in the Aberdeen Free Press, later printed in Alexander MacKenzie's history of the clearances, and noted at Glendale by the Napier commission: but by the time that it was posted, Glendale was clearly on the brink of open rebellion.

There was talk of a formal and openly-organised District Alliance against the landlords, a clear consciousness of the rent-strike weapon and the possibility of land-raiding: MacPherson would shortly be gaoled for his anti-landlord activities: and the people were increasingly restive about estate regulations of whatever nature. As Alexander Ross would tell the commission, 'I cannot judge a factor's heart by the heart of any man'. The factor had earlier shot the dog of Ross: 'he shot him with his gun in the well and the well is dry since then. It was one of the best wells in the country but since then it has denied water. I do not know what he did to the well, but likely if he could kill the well, he would do it'. Such, in one striking image, were social relations in the west of Skye at the beginning of the 1880s.

By then, there may already have been a knowledge in the glen of the Irish land league, and its forms of popular persuasion; certainly, an Irishman would be in the district soon enough. Tenants inclined to pay rent would shortly be threatened; and certainly too, John Murdoch of the Highlander was on his way to Glendale, where his host in the glen would be threatened by the factor for giving room to 'blackguards and Irishmen'.

In any case, a direct result of the edict displayed at the post office was the calling of a general meeting of the tenants. In time-honoured fashion, petitions were sent to the landlord - and in precisely the same fashion, rejected. The tenants at once declared a rent-strike. For good measure they also announced that they would shortly occupy the Waterstein sheep farm, with or without permission.

Now, in a gesture of unprecedented moderation, the landlords asked for time to consider the position. They were told, however, that the people had run out of patience. By the end of May their sheep were on the farm; Court of Session orders were ignored; warrants of arrest could not be executed; and at the Martinmas rent collection in Glendale, only five of the estate's one hundred crofters came forward to pay.

Nor did events in the glen go un-noticed elsewhere. Apart from lengthy reports in the pro-crofter weeklies, journalists were sent by train, steamer and dog-cart from the Aberdeen Free Press, the Dundee Advertiser, and the Glasgow Citizen: while papers like the North British Daily Mail covered events in Glendale with a keen eye and helped to keep affairs there before a wider public.

In short, Glendale was now the scene of open rebellion on the land question, the locus of head-on conflict between two clear positions on the ownership and use of land in the Highlands. The view of the common people had been given voice by John MacPherson with an eloquence which any paraphrase must fail to match: the land belonged to the people whose country it was and whose ancestors had lived in it and worked on it.

The view of the landlord class was equally simple: that the land, its use and occupancy, was in the gift of those who owned it in

law, along with the associated right to do with it (and such as scraped a living from it) precisely as they chose.

Between these positions on the land, its use and ownership, there was little room for compromise. Nor in any case was there now any taste for compromise on either side. Two radically different, and irreconcilable, viewpoints thus stood opposed. In one corner were the landlords of whom a Hebridean poet had observed over a century earlier that they were men so mean 'they would geld a louse if it would rise in value by a farthing': and in the other, was the common people - if not in arms, then certainly in unarmed rebellion.