

5. Braes and the Napier Commission.

'I cannot bear evidence to the distress of my people without bearing evidence to the oppression and high-handedness of the landlord and his factor'.

FROM THE start of 1882 the people of the Highlands embarked on a qualitatively new stage of agitation. It was one that would run right through to the passage four years later of legislation designed to ameliorate, it not solve, the landlord-problem: and on again, at as high a pitch, for at least another two years with a view to distributing the land in the cause of crofter and at the expense of landlord. The experience of these years showed, or at least most powerfully suggested, that in the words of the slogan of the Land League - the Highland Land Law Reform Association - the people were indeed mightier than any landlord.

In 1882, as a prelude to the gathering storm, agitation was centred on Skye. It arose first at Glendale and then moved to Braes, on the other side of the island. Towards the end of the year there were surges of trouble in Lewis, Barra, Tiree, Wester Ross and Sutherland as well. But it was the events at Braes that really caught the imagination of a wider public. It was the events at Braes that - at least for that wider public - signalled the opening shots in the all-out land-war on which the Highlands appeared to have now embarked.

The events at Braes also caught the attention of the authorities: estate, legal, and governmental. Their confidential reports, notably those of Sheriff Ivory of Inverness-shire, repose to this day in the archives and demonstrate the extent to which popular

agitation in the Highlands had started to seriously alarm those same authorities.

Braes, too, illustrates the role of the press in publicising and promoting (which was often the same thing) the crofters' cause: and demonstrates the 'hot torch of publicity' in concerted action for the first time in the crofters' war of the coming years. According to one report, for instance, the newspapers represented in Skye during the month of the Battle of the Braes included the Dundee Advertiser, the People's Journal (which would be giving strong coverage to crofting issues a full forty years later), the Glasgow Citizen, the Scotsman, the Glasgow Herald, the North British Daily Mail, the Inverness Courier, the Northern Chronicle, the London Standard (reportedly sending its war correspondent), and the Freeman's Journal.

The matter of events at Braes was also raised in parliament, with Charles Fraser-MacIntosh asking the Lord Advocate in the Commons on 20 April, 'if he can explain the circumstances under which fifty of the Glasgow police force have been sent to the Isle of Skye?' - and here was a further indication of how serious matters in the Highlands were not being regarded.

The background to the events of the spring of that year stretched back almost two decades. The people of Braes had had the use of the nearby hill of Ben Lee until 1865, when they were ejected by the MacDonald estate in favour of a sheep farm. In 1881, when the lease on this farm was about to end, they petitioned the estate for the return of the grazing of the hill. This petition was at once rejected. The people at once decided on a rent-strike, and marched into Portree to proclaim it.

The estate considered arrests on the grounds of 'intimidation of the landlords', but did not think that the claim would stand up in

court. So it resorted to attempting to evict a few tenants, on the grounds that the rent-strike had driven them into rent-arrears. Orders to quit were taken out against a dozen of the strikers: but the sheriff-officer attempting to serve these orders was accosted, and his papers burned. This was deforcement - a criminal offence rather than a civil matter - and warrants for arrest were issued. At this point Ivory, the sheriff for Inverness-shire, arrived with his force of fifty police. The celebrated riot then took place on the narrow track into the township, on the steep side of the hill, above the shore. Five men were arrested despite ferocious opposition from the people of Braes.

Given the history of landlord-tenant relations in Braes, as the people themselves told it then and later, the ferocity of their opposition may scarcely have been remarkable. The very first meeting of the Napier Commission was held in Braes. Its very first witness was Angus Stewart, a crofter of Braes, who gave his answers in Gaelic. Stewart was the author of the much-quoted line, characteristic of everything Napier's commission would hear as it toured the Highlands that summer, and one that well serves as an epitaph to the commissioners' endeavours: 'I cannot bear evidence to the distress of my people without bearing evidence to the oppression and high-handedness of the landlord and his factor'.

Stewart set the tone of the proceedings by asking for a guarantee that he would not be victimised by the estate for giving evidence: and proceeded to offer it anyway. His words to this day encapsulate to perfection the popular vision of what was wrong with the system of land-ownership in the Highlands. 'The smallness of our holdings and the inferior quality of the land is what has caused our poverty; and the way in which the poor crofters are huddled

together, and the best part of the land devoted to deer forests and big farms’.

His remedy was equally simple. ‘What would remedy the people’s grievances throughout the island of Skye is to give them plenty of land, as there is plenty of it, and they are willing to work it. Give us the land out of the plenty of land that is about for cultivation. That is the principal remedy that I see - give us the land!’

A procession of other witnesses followed. Their stories offered evidence of land-use and misuse over the previous century, evidence of the clear view of the people that they had a natural right to the land on which they lived: and evidence too of the strength of popular memory on the land question. The simple and powerful eloquence of scores - hundreds - of other crofting witnesses before the Napier Commission renders paraphrase less than appropriate. The simple and powerful clarity (and certainty) of this eloquence, and its unanimity, itself constitutes a searing indictment of class relations and associated issues in the nineteenth-century Highlands.

For instance, deportation (and the word is clearly merited) of the common people - for long the only response of the landlord class to popular land-hunger - was in Braes, as throughout the Highlands, briskly rejected. According to one crofter, ‘I would like it very well if those who are wallowing in wealth would go away where no crofter would obstruct their wishes in land’. For another, in a typically memorable phrase, ‘the places I knew in my young days where the grass could be cut with the scythe are now as bare as possible with deer and big sheep’.

The response of this single crofter was replicated time and again during the course of the Napier hearings. And such a sustained and collective view is not a thing of the past either. In

very recent years, there have been inhabitants of Braes who could lay claim to an informed and accurate version of events a century and more earlier.

John Nicolson, for example, had both his great-grandfather and grandfather gaoled for their part in the Battle of the Braes. 'The hill land was being taken from the crofters. To do this, the rents were increased to such an extent that the poor crofters couldn't afford to pay, so then they were threatened with eviction. This led to a lot of unrest and they refused to pay the rent and the story I have heard is that the sheriff-officer was sent to Braes with eviction notices. He was met by a deputation of crofters, when he was handed a glowing peat and made to burn the eviction notices. He then returned to Portree and reported to his superiors and as a result it was decided that the crofters were in revolt. It was then decided to send a force of police to quell this revolt in Braes'.

In the words of another Braes resident, Willie MacDonald (these words delivered with a cadence, wit and attention to detail that would not have shamed a witness before the Napier hearings): 'Well, it happened in 1882, the Battle of the Braes. They lost the grazing of Ben Lee, three townships, Peinchorran, Balmeanach and Gedintailor. And they were left with what they called the township common grazing. And this grazing that they lost, it was 3,440 acres, divided between 29 individual shares. They were only left with in Peinchorran approximately 299 acres, in Balmeanach 214, and in Genintailor, I amn't sure, about 230 or something. They started a rent-strike and the rent-strike took place and then they were going to be evicted by sheriff-officers, and these sheriff-officers came as far as Gedintailor, and the people resisted, taking the summonses and they went after them, and they took a burning peat, the matches

wasn't so plentiful then, or the lighters, they took a burning peat from a man called Donald MacPherson in Ollach, upper Ollach, and they made the man blow the flames on the summons, and burned them'.

In the words of Nicolson, 'the chief constable of Glasgow decided to send a force of policemen and they arrived in Braes on a wet and stormy morning in April 1882, and there the battle took place'.

According to Kate MacPherson, 'my father was born in Braes and my grandparents lived there of course, my grandfather was a crofter. I can remember my father talking very much about the battle, he must have been five or six at the time, and what he remembered, what I remember about him telling the story so much, was how frightened he was when he saw his mother being attacked by the policemen and he was terrified because they were manhandling my grandfather, and of course my grandmother went to his rescue. She was a very tall, strapping, strong young woman, and three policemen she knocked out, and she was batoned, and what he remembered being so afraid of was his mother lying on the ground with blood pouring over her face. My grandmother wasn't the only woman in that situation, but I know she was one in particular that was badly hurt. It was a black day for the crofters of Braes, that day'.

Yet another recollection goes thus: 'My grandmother was Marion MacMillan, she was in the battle, we were told the policemen made for her, she was a very strong woman, and they made for her, she put one of them on his back. There are ruins there now, which Colin MacDonald uses for his sheep and things. There were two women staying there at the time, and when the police came and the

battle started, they came out with a bucket of ashes and they threw the ashes to blind the police, it gave them a good advantage’.

Well into the 1980s, Ivory was recalled locally. In the words of one Braes resident, ‘the police came to Portree and they marched down to Braes with the sheriff of the county, Sheriff Ivory, and it seems his height was about five feet four, and I read in a book all dicators were about that height, Mussolini and Hitler, yes, and Sheriff Ivory’.

According to John Nicolson, ‘my great grandfather and my grandfather were among those apprehended. They were taken to gaol in Inverness, but their fines were paid by well-wishers and they were released. They were met at Portree pier by people from all over Skye and carried shoulder-high to the local hostelry where they were well feted’.

And in the words of Alisdair Beaton, ‘another thing I was told, that day the Balmeanach and Gedintailor people were there and they were saying, when are the Peinchorran people? So word was sent and they were on the shore, cutting seaweed, at that time they used to take boats and fill the boats, so they left the boats and made for the battle, probably they didn’t care if they would lose the boats or not with the tide coming in, but anyway when they came back the boats were still high and dry, and they were saying afterwards, they never saw a tide in their lives that stayed out so long as it did that day’.

The aftermath of the events at Braes, given the state of agitation by then sweeping over Skye, was predictable. Of the five men taken to Inverness, three were fined £1, and the others the equivalent of £2.50. When they returned home to a tumultuous welcome, the crofters of Braes simply drove their stock onto Ben

Lee; while MacDonald's agents applied for, and got, a Court of Session order demanding that they be removed, as they were there illegally.

Fifty-three people were to be served with these orders. But in September the messenger-at-arms carrying the orders was put to flight by the women of the district. Ivory asked for 100 soldiers to subdue Braes. But the request was denied - an interesting enough refusal, in terms of what it suggested with regard to government perceptions of events in the Highlands - but the county's police force was increased by fifty men. In October, however, when the messenger-at-arms returned in the company of eleven policemen to serve his notices, they were all prevented even from entering the district by a crowd of crofters: and two months later, thwarted, the MacDonald estate retreated and agreed to lease the grazing of Ben Lee to the crofters of Braes.

In short, the crofters of Braes had won an unequivocal victory. By then, of course, the balance of forces had tilted against the landowners of Skye - both as landowners and, at least by implication, as bearers of a culture clearly viewed (by those who gave evidence to Napier) as alien: whether Captain Fraser of Kilmuir and his 46, 000 acres; Norman (Harrow and Athenaeum) MacLeod of MacLeod of Dunvegan, 'Isle of Skye, N.B.' and his 141,000 acres; or Lord (Eton and Carlton) MacDonald of Armadale Castle, 'Isle of Skye, N.B.', and his 131,000 acres. For by the time of the Battle of the Braes, the anti-landlord movement had developed a momentum of its own - encouraged not only by direct events, but also by the agitation of the Highland press.

In this, Alexander MacKenzie's Celtic Magazine, published out of Inverness, played more or less every month its own significant

role. Indeed, the view is persuasive that the overall role of MacKenzie during the land agitation was at least as impressive as that of John Murdoch. A glance at the appropriate files of the Celtic Magazine quickly shows MacKenzie's sense of what was significant in the Highlands.

In January 1882, for instance, the magazine published as a special supplement a very long report on the annual meeting at Perth of the Federation of Celtic Societies. One issue later, it carried a long letter from 'A Canadian Highlander'. In it the refrain, inseparable from the land agitation of the time and later, of radicalism on one hand and nationalism on the other, can clearly be heard: 'Give Scotland Liberal Land Laws for which we are glad to see they are now agitating, and hope they will soon obtain - surely there is enough spirit of independence in the descendants of the followers of Wallace and Bruce to assure and secure their civil rights and liberties, whether usurped by Scottish lairds or English millionaires'.

The same issue carried a full-page report on the last meeting of the Edinburgh Sutherland Association. At it, John MacKay of Hereford had referred to the land question in Sutherland, and had warned that, 'in the immediate future large tracts of their beloved country might be turned into huge deer-forests'. Professor Blackie had also spoken at the meeting, and had said that the principle of the Irish Land Act 'applied to the Highlands as well as to Ireland', for the people of the Highlands had a right to the soil. 'This was the favourable moment, the moment when they must speak out, and if they did not speak out now they would be lost forever'.

Two issues later, the magazine was carrying a piece by John MacKay on the Sutherland evictions. The following month, as well

as covering the results of the recent Gaelic census, the Celtic Magazine was reporting events at Glendale. 'The tenants paid their rents at Martinmas last, but they have given notice that unless their demands are conceded they will not pay the rent due at Martinmas next. They are in great hope that the friends of the Gael in the large towns of the south will manfully aid them in their battle with landlordism'.

June's edition carried a short piece on the Battle of the Braes, and a much longer article on Lord MacDonald, the Highland destitution and the 'clearances of 1849-1852'. The July edition gave space to a ten-page piece by Lachlan MacDonald of Skeabost on the land agitation in the Highlands, and in Skye in particular. The issue also included a follow-up to the Lord MacDonald-and-destitution article in the previous issue: and three pages on particularly severe evictions then under way at Lochcarron.

The following month's Celtic Magazine carried a full-page report on the formation of a 'Highland Land Law Reform Association' at Inverness. The new association was intended by its founders, 'to effect such changes in the Land Laws as shall prevent the waste of large tracts of productive land in the North, provide security of tenure, increase protection to the tillers of the soil, and promote the general welfare of the people. A special object of the Association shall be the encouragement and fostering of small-holdings in the Highlands, and the collection and publication of the facts and circumstances connected with evictions in the North'.

The same issue of the magazine carried a report on the treatment of events in Skye by local and national newspapers: and an article on the 'Skye crofters and their claims'.

This was an early reference to the growing demand, brilliantly orchestrated by MacKenzie and his magazine, for an official enquiry into the condition of the crofters (as small tenants were increasingly called). A deputation from the new Highland Land Law Reform Association had met with Fraser-MacIntosh in Inverness, 'with reference to the necessity of energetic action in parliament in favour of special enquiry into the crofter question by Royal Commission'.

MacKenzie himself announced that a majority of the members of the town council of Inverness was already in membership of the Land Law Reform association. And he added, 'the time has passed for any half-hearted action', for unless something were done, he 'feared the people would themselves take to the settling of the question, and no one could predict the consequences'. At all events, there was 'looming in the near future a general movement throughout the Highlands on behalf of more equitable relations between landlord and tenant'. To this Fraser-MacIntosh had agreed, and had promised to raise the matter in the next session of parliament, because 'events now occurring render inquiry imperative'.

Meanwhile MacKenzie and the land-law association kept up the pressure for a commission right through the following winter. In November, his Celtic Magazine carried yet another piece on the Sutherland evictions; and a report on a trial following events at Rogart. Quoting the Oban Times of 7 October, the magazine reported, 'The crofter, Andrew MacKenzie, who was reinstated by his neighbours recently, was tried before the Sheriff at Dornoch on Saturday, and received the heavy sentence of one month's imprisonment, with the option of a fine'.

Professor Blackie had already been agitating on the matter. And now MacKenzie added, 'People who know the case thoroughly wonder why it was tried before the sheriff-principal, and not before the sheriff-substitute. Here we find sheriff MacIntosh, himself a laird, and, in his capacity as advocate in Edinburgh, senior counsel in the case of Lord MacDonald against the crofters of Ben Lee, sitting to judge a case which arose out of an attempt to evict Andrew MacKenzie from his croft. It is probable that this will be brought before the notice of Parliament by the Federation of Celtic Societies'.

In other words, even by this early point, publicists and agitators and parliamentarians were working in close collaboration; although on a scale that could not begin to match what was to come.

In the Celtic Magazine's December issue, MacKenzie carried an article on land nationalisation, and another piece on the Braes crofters. In January he printed a piece on the depopulation of Argyll; and a four-page article on the first Highland emigration ship to Nova Scotia - the Hector. The following month he carried long quotes on the crofters's agitation from the Greenock Telegraph and the Christian Leader. By then, 'a number of gentlemen, summoned by Lord Archibald Campbell' had met in London and passed resolutions 'requesting the Government to grant the offending Skye crofters Òsufficient timeÓ to submit to the law before force is used, and urging the appointment of a Royal Commission'. And just days later, in Edinburgh, some 2,500 people met to demand a commission that would inquire, among other things, into the 'extensive depopulation of fertile districts for the purpose of sport'.

With MacKenzie in attendance, as well as Blackie, and D. H. MacFarlane MP (these three were central to the city-based land-

reform leadership of the coming years), the meeting also demanded the 'utilisation for productive purposes of the vast tracts of the country at present under deer'.

And Blackie moved a motion - carried unanimously - that the meeting, 'recognising the necessity at this juncture for united action on the part of all friends of the Highlands, heartily endorses the object of the Land Law Reform Association to provide a basis for combined action in favour of such changes in the land laws as may be necessary - and recommends the formation of similar associations throughout the country'.

As a direct response to this publicity, the government did indeed grant the formation of a commission into crofters' grievances shortly afterwards. It was now six years since MacKenzie had first called for one, almost as long since the Gaelic Society of Inverness had asked for it; and since then it had been demanded by an 1880 public meeting in Inverness, by the Federation of Celtic Societies, the Gaelic Society of Perth, and the Highland Land Law Reform Associations of Inverness and Edinburgh. Fraser-MacIntosh had also written to the Home Secretary in February: 'I could not have believed that so soon after the meeting in Inverness in December 1880 the agitation should have gone to such a pitch. It will be imprudent to delay'.

MacKenzie promptly urged that steps be taken to counter the landlord influence that would, if allowed, be brought to bear on the commission: otherwise, 'it will only prove the commencement of an agitation on the Land Question the end of which no one can predict'. A little later he warned, 'if it fails to give satisfaction the people by a more powerful, legitimate and persistent agitation, will still have the remedy in their own hands'.

The commission, however, had the effect of unleashing on the public the history of class-relations in the Highlands over the best part of the previous century: and of serving as a focus for the anti-landlord movement in general. From the very first meeting in Braes this was the pattern that was set, whether on the mainland or in the islands.

On Mull, for instance, the commission met at Tobermory. It heard that in 1841 there had been over 10,000 people residing on Mull, and yet within only ten years this number had fallen to no more than 6,500: and by the census of 1881, it was shown that the population had fallen even further, to just over half the numbers of forty years earlier.

John MacCallum noted how he had witnessed great changes in Mull even in his own lifetime. With every new landlord, he said, and with every so-called 'improvement', the crofters were left worse off than before. John MacKinnon, aged 93, told of a spot where there had once been 129 crofts, and now only two remained. Lachlan Kennedy reported repeated raisings of rent; successive reductions of land; and one occasion when the factor had compulsorily taken land from the crofters, leaving them without grazing for their cattle, and then bought those cattle at a price far below their real value. And Lachlan M'Guerrie (as the minutes of the commission style the name) described his eviction from his croft at Ormaic at the hands of the proprietor, a policeman and a sheriff-officer; and his experience of having to take refuge with his family in a hut on the shore six yards above the high-water mark.

This evidence was given against a wider background, the significance of which could not escape the attention of those giving it. By now, after all, it was August - the start of the 'sporting' season

in the Highlands. According to the correspondent of the Times, for instance, prospects were excellent for 'Scotch grouse'. 'Daily and nightly the trains from the south come into Edinburgh and Glasgow heavily laden with passengers and baggage. They are sent on to Stirling and to Perth, to Aberdeen and Inverness and Oban. Oban becomes a little Euston, and Inverness a miniature King's Cross'.

Of all the moors in the island of Mull, those in the Bunessan district gave promise of the best sport. The birds there were said to be very numerous and unusually forward and strong, while in Inverness-shire the season was expected to be the best for at least six years. In the forests, the deer were in unusually good condition too: 'Good reports come from North Knapdale, Easdale, Ballachullish, Morvern, and from Tobermory, Salen and Bunessan in Mull'.

Meanwhile, it was to Bunessan that the Napier Commission moved after Tobermory. The district was for the most part in the ownership of the Duke of Argyll. Of his 54,000 acres, 49,000 were let for sheep farming, while the remaining 3,700 acres were let to 74 crofters. The crofters paid double in rents per acre what the sheep farmers paid: though, as one of the commissioners noted, the best land was in the large farms, and the crofters had the worst.

The first crofters' delegate, Allan MacInnes, told of the repeated raising of crofting rents between 1850 and 1876: of how fifteen years earlier half of their hill-land had been taken away by the factor who then added it to his own land; of how they got no compensation for improving their crofts; and of how they had no security of tenure - so that, should they improve their land, they could be evicted and get nothing for their work, which was of course a positive discouragement to crofters trying to improve their position.

(These were, of course, precisely the sort of grievances that the commission would attempt to remedy when it came to deliver its report on its findings).

And in a joint statement from Alexander MacPherson and Malcolm MacLean, the commission heard, 'there is excellent land lying nearby in the hands of the proprietor, that is ready for the plough; and if he does not allow the men who are willing to work it to take a living out of it, and add to the wealth of the nation, it is a good enough reason why we should add our voice to that of the others who have suggested that the government should take it into their own hands, and make sure that it is applied to the purposes for which God created it'.

Then the commission moved to the island of Lismore. There, the first crofter delegate to appear asked for immunity from victimisation by the estate on account of the evidence he intended to give. The factor refused such an undertaking - but the people of the island went on to tell their story anyway. Donald MacDonald was one such witness, who described what had happened when some of the island fell into the hands of a southern lawyer by the name of Cheyne.

'When he got the whole place under grass, instead of under crops, then he stocked it all, and the people were all away by that time. Those who had the means to take them to America went there, and some went to the largest towns. The poorest became labourers to him at one shilling a day for the men and sixpence for the women, and they were paid each Saturday by a kind of meal. If they would not work for him on these terms, he threatened to pull down the houses of the poor people about their ears'.

And on Lismore the commission also heard the factor for one of the owners of the island report on his employer's response to a petition for a rent-reduction. 'It seems to me that they have combined to put pressure on me, being apparently encouraged by the sympathy shown to the Skye crofters. I shall distinctly resist any attempt to coerce me. I think the crofter system a bad one. A crofter living on his croft has no right to expect anything but the most abject poverty. His condition is one of idleness and of necessity poverty'.

These three quotations demonstrate, with incomparable simplicity crofter perception of what had happened in the previous century or so to the Highland economy. They indicate what the crofters' view of landownership was, and what the landlord's position was. A marked current of class and cultural antipathy might, with justice, also be attributed to each side.

Throughout the rest of their tour, the Napier commissioners were to hear much more of the same. In Morvern, for instance, on the shores of Loch Sunart and the sound of Mull, 'where the land is good, the people were removed - down to narrow and small places by the shore. Some of them have a cow's grass, and some of them are simply cottars'.

At the meeting in Acharacle, the commissioners heard that, 'we cannot get any land to cultivate, although abundance of good land, formerly under cultivation, is going to waste at our very doors. The first evictions which took place in this district happened between fifty and sixty years ago. The second eviction happened between forty and fifty years ago, when the tenants of several townships on the estates of Acharn and Ardtornish received summonses of removal from the proprietors before they sold the estate to Mr.

Patrick Sellar of Sutherlandshire. There was another cruel and very harsh eviction which took place in this district about seventeen years ago. There was yet another eviction on the estate of the lady Lady Gordon of Drimnin'.

The same story - of arbitrary eviction, of no security of tenure, of marginalisation on the worst of the land, of uncompensated improvement - was to be told across the Highlands to Napier and his commissioners that summer. In Arisaig, for instance, the common people of the district had suffered as the district passed from proprietorial hand to hand, from Clanranald to Lady Ashburton to Lord Cranstoun to Mr MacKay: and finally into the ownership of the Astley-Nicholson family (whose undoubted fortune derived from the coal-pits of Duckinfield outside Manchester).

The principal speaker at the meeting of the commission in Arisaig was the local minister, Donald MacCallum, who had been born at Craignish within a generation of the clearances and evictions there. His first parish, after Glasgow University, had been in Morvern. The following year, 1884, he would succeed in forming a Morvern branch of the Land Law Reform Association. His story was also one of eviction, overcrowding, rent increases and no security of tenure at all.

MacCallum also told of the so-called 'Seventeen Commandments', or Arisaig Estate regulations. He told of how, under these regulations, sons were not allowed to stay on their parents' crofts after the age of 21, and also of how they could not be given any house or land in the district in which to live independently. He described how crofters had to get estate permission even to improve a house or croft. 'One does not like to say that these

English and other folk have a positive hatred to the native Highlander, but there is something at the bottom of it’.

And out in the islands, the commissioners were to hear the same sort of story again and again. In South Uist, one witness reported, ‘there is twice or thrice as much waste arable land in South Uist as there is under cultivation. As there is plenty of arable land in the country not used or cultivated, we want as much of it as will support our families comfortably, and that at a reasonable rent, with security that we shall not be removed from our holdings’.

In Barra, the crofters had the same complaints, and the same demands. Barra (and South Uist) had suffered from some of the worst clearing-landlords in the past - beginning with Colonel Gordon of Cluny buying the bankrupt property from the MacNeils in 1839, and ending with the death of the inveterate Lady Gordon Cathcart in 1931. (Her ladyship’s ‘positive hatred for the native Highlander’ was never in doubt, and she ensured that it extended beyond the grave. Her will instructed that the island be sold and that the proceeds of the sale be used so that ‘an emigration fund could be set up to encourage the tenants to emigrate from the estate to the Dominions, Colonies and Dependencies’. Not until 1977 was the fund, then worth £194,000, wound-up. The residual funds went to Putney’s hospital for the incurables, and the London mission to the lepers).

Ten years after Lady Cathcart’s death, Donald Buchanan of Barra recalled in print his conversations with two of the crofters who gave evidence to Napier in May 1883. But as Buchanan observed, the tyrannies of the Gordon regime ‘carried within their very nature the seeds of revolt’. And as the minutes of the Napier Commissioners demonstrate, their progress around the Highlands in that long summer of agitation served only to increase the anti-

landlord sentiments of the previous years. The report volume of Napier records: 'The land agitation in the Highlands is not likely to pass away without some adjustment of the claims of the occupiers acceptable to the greater number who are not yet possessed with extravagant expectations'.

Hence, agitation was going from strength to strength. From Kilmuir, the Free Church minister MacPhail, was worried about 'disorder and lawlessness'; and added that, 'there have been combinations among the people against the payment of rent, and there have been threats posted up at the road side to deter men from settling with the factor on rent day. In the present circumstances of our island population I feel sure that a little more strain and a little more agitation would soon fan them into a state of wild confusion'.

The farmers on Kilmuir, meanwhile, wished to point out to the commissioners, 'that an organised agitation was got up and prepared for the advent of the commission. Previous to the arrival of the commission, certain parties organised meetings of the tenantry, with a view to agitation and the allegation of grievances. It was almost hopeless at the the time for the proprietors of loyal tenants to express themselves, popular feeling, under the prevailing influences, being apparently all for revolutionary ideas'.

As to the cause of the agitation, 'we believe that it was, in the first instance, due to the course of events in Ireland. It is well known that an Irish agitator was in Skye for most of last season, as well as various others of similar type'.

From Waternish, Captain Allan MacDonald had the same bitter complaint - 'no doubt all this land-cry has been got up by outside agitators and by paid agents'. And from MacLeod of

MacLeod the commissioners heard that, 'for some considerable time there have been agitators in every corner of the island, circulating the most communistic doctrines, and endeavouring to set tenants against their landlords'.

From Strath, the Rev. Donald MacKinnon complained that, 'as a consequence of the agitation, and unreasonable expectectations of a crofters' millennium raised by well-meaning but judicious counsellors and by disloyal socialistic demagogues, a tendency to exaggeration and mis-representation had seized the minds of the people'.

And MacKinnon added, 'What is the reason of the agitation and discontent which has been prevalent? Not a few have been unwillingly concussed by threats of personal violence to join in the agitation on account of the Utopian and communistic ideals instilled into their minds by professional and unprincipled agitators and further, by the way in which the disaffected and turbulent were permitted so long with impunity to go on setting the law at defiance'.

MacKinnon also sent to the commissioners 'foolish and criminal pamphlets and cartoons' which had fallen into his ministerial hands, and referred to others, 'more objectionable still, which I have not been able to get, freely circulated by an agent of the Land League'.

Captain Fraser himself made reference to his tenants as 'the tools of political agitators and the victims of political enthusiasts', and said that he was, 'quite aware that there are parties who have been endeavouring to promote discontent on my property. In my opinion the present disturbed state of things in Skye is very much due to agitation in consequence of late events in Ireland'.

From Stornoway, the Church of Scotland minister, MacIver, thought that, 'it is evident [to] those who know the real state of the Highland crofters that the commission has not been appointed a day too soon. In many places matters have been getting into a dangerous state'.

And from Knock, the Free Church minister feared 'a future far more troublesome than it has yet been, unless some remedy is applied'. The tenants of Calbost, meantime, wrote to Lady Matheson, enclosing a copy of a petition they had already sent, reminding her that it had not been replied to, and warning that they trusted that, 'we may not be led to resort reluctantly to such steps as many of our unfortunate countrymen are forced to adopt'.

Also from Stornoway, the local solicitor wrote to the commission noting that, 'the policy of the estate must be characterised as a tortuous, subtle, and aggressive one in pursuit of territorial aggrandisement and despotic power'. And he further warned, 'the island most undoubtedly is, and long has been, seething in a chronic state of discontent. Any vagrant spark might kindle a dangerous conflagration. What precise shape this unhealthy feeling might ultimately assume, no one can predict. The crofters have long been, and still are, insulted, trampled on, and terrorised over'.

In Orkney too, the agitation had been having an effect. Lieutenant-General Traill Burroughs complained of his tenants, 'they are endeavouring to establish a reign of lawlessness and terror here'. He referred to attacks made on him in the Orkney Herald, and of a letter, received some days after the commission had left Kirkwall, 'threatening me with death should I ever remove a tenants

from my estate'. Threats of vengeance and destruction to stock, crops and property were being dealt-out by 'agitators', he claimed.

'The more I have enquired into this agitation, the more convinced I am that it is an exotic product which has been fostered into growth by the unscrupulous agency of outside agitators'. And his lady wife, 'whose one idea has always been to do good and make happy all around her', had been so hurt at the 'wicked and ungrateful statements made by the so-called delegates before the Royal Commission in Kirkwall, on behalf, as they said, of all my tenants', that she, 'had resolved not to take any trouble on their account any more, and declined to give the children's party'.

In short, the ruling class in the Highlands was under threat, and something had to be done. According to one Gilchrist, an Alness farmer, 'it is a fact that good men and true, throughout the country, are feeling that something is far wrong, and that something must be done by and for the public safety'.

News of the commission was spreading far beyond the Scottish Highlands. Its doings were watched closely, and without great patience, from abroad, as the letters home of emigrants indicate. In the abrupt words of one, written from the Benbecula Settlement, North West Territory: 'Tell me if the commissioners did any good'.

It should be evident, then, that the tour of the Napier Commission fuelled the flames of an agitation that was in any case growing apace across the Highlands. Indeed, the commission was a product of popular unrest and combined pressure from two groups: those who were outwith the community and yet of it, like Alexander MacKenzie, along with simple allies from the south of Scotland, such as Blackie.

But the powerhouse of agitation was the direct action of the crofters themselves, albeit a direct action that lay within strictly reformist limits. The crofters spurned, for instance, the sort of agrarian terror and clandestine organisation characteristic of Russia at various points throughout the nineteenth century. And though they could not, perhaps, be expected themselves to know of this history (despite Donald MacKinnon's reference to communistic agitators), it is at least arguable that their external leaders did.

Not is there any substantial evidence that some of the brisker examples of Irish land-agitation were considered. Although the leadership was not coy in referring to events in Ireland, the references seem to have been intended as no more than verbal provocation. There was no burning of lodges, mansions and mock-castles, for instance - though this would hardly have been difficult in much of the Highlands. Nor was there any attempt at murder of landlords or their agents, either. Above all, there was no attempt to form an armed organisation, any truly secret brotherhood, or an Irish, Russian, or any other, model. (Or at least if there was, no one ever heard of it).

Had these courses been followed, the stakes would have increased substantially in the Highland land agitation. And they might have led to a conflagration on an all-Scottish scale. Whether the forces to sustain such a conflagration existed in the south of the country in sufficient depth is open to question, of course - as is the likely response of the authorities, principally in the shape of the London government.

In any case, the tactics developed up until Braes and the tour of the Napier Commission had served well enough, certainly to that point. But though there was always a marked current of antipathy to

a landlordism that was in essence English, the crofters' struggle was not in any immediate sense an integral part of some wider struggle for national independence.

In the absence, on any significant scale, of such a wider controlling ideological vision, the tactics developed by the time of the Battle of the Braes were strictly reformist. But they had served well enough: and as the agitation continued to grow, they would continue to serve the movement well enough too.