

6. the Land League Grows.

‘The movement is carried on with almost incredible enthusiasm and determination. Meetings are being held at regular intervals and speeches delivered that would do credit to a Member of Parliament’.

THE DECADE of THE 1880s opened on a European scale with a magnificent flourish in the direction of posterity: peace had been declared in the Balkans. An orgy of self-congratulation followed the Congress of Berlin which systematised this Peace with Honour, as the Great Powers were pleased to describe it. In 1875 the province of Herzegovina had risen in rebellion against its Turkish (and Muslim) masters. Some of its Slavonic (and Christian) neighbours in the Turkish empire also rose, along with the people of independent Serbia. The Turks set out to crush the rebellion; the British prepared to expel the Turks ‘bag and baggage’ from their Bulgarian territories; and the Russians declared war and invaded Turkey.

Britain sent a fleet of battleships to the Dardanelles and prepared to invade too. Bismarck, however, summoned the Powers to Berlin in 1878. At that congress, it was decided that Macedonia would remain Turkish; Serbia and Montenegro would be independent states; and Bosnia and Herzegovina would be administered by Austria, though remaining nominally Turkish possessions. The Balkans, in short, had been sliced up and handed out. A European war, sparked by conflict in the region, had been avoided, at least for the time being. And the great imperial powers were able to continue the unfettered indulgence of their taste for imperial expansion. Nobody in their right minds could know that within a handful of decades, three of these imperial powers would be

utterly destroyed, and the fourth fatally weakened: and nobody mentioned a place called Kosovo.

In Britain, public affairs were characterised by the alteration of Liberal and Conservative governments, cyclical agricultural (and industrial) depressions, social change, continuing agitation for independence in Ireland, and the slow but sure development of a labour movement that would yet be independent of the two existing great parties.

Gladstone had led a Liberal administration from 1868 to 1874; Disraeli a Conservative one, from then until 1880 (he died a year later); and Gladstone again, from 1880 to 1885. In these years, competition from the products of colonial farmers - wheat, meat and wool - drove domestic agriculture into a depression from which it was never to recover. In consequence the landed classes began to be displaced from the pre-eminence which they had for so long enjoyed in the realms of national affairs and the promotion of self-interest.

With a short-term depression in manufacturing industry also under way, these years saw the growth of state intervention in the economic and social life of Britain. The Climbing Boys' Act of 1875 modified somewhat the atrocious conditions endured by the soot-encrusted apprentices of master chimney-sweeps. The Artisans' Dwellings Act of the same year gave local authorities the power to demolish urban slums and build new workers' houses in their place. (Urban artisans had had the vote since the second Reform Act of eight years earlier). In 1875, Samuel Plimsoll's famous outburst in the House of Commons finally inclined the government to move against murderous shipowners (though no one yet thought it proper

to concern themselves with the fearsome conditions of workhouse lads effectively trades as slaves into the deep-sea fishing industry).

In Ireland, which had been governed directly from Westminster since the abolition of the Dublin parliament two years after the great rebellion of 1798, agitation for independence was endless. Much of it centred on the land question. In 1870, Gladstone's first Irish Land Act made some provision in the direction of tenants' interests. Among other things, it allowed the government to lend money to a tenant to buy his holding, if the landlord was prepared to sell it. But all too often the landlords were not so willing, and the tenants were therefore unable to buy. A second Land Act followed in 1881, two years after Michael Davitt had formed his Land League and (in the unwilling company of Captain Boycott) introduced the concept to which the good captain gave his name: boycotting. The legislation was characterised by the famous 'three Fs': fair rent set by a land court; fixity of tenure for any tenant who paid his fair rent; and free sale of land, rather than obligatory sale to the existing landlord. None of this affected in the slightest the Irish demand for independence, but its significance can scarcely have escaped the agitators for land-reform in the Highlands.

Nor can they have overlooked developments relating to the united organisation of workers, and to the lawful rights of combination in trades-unions of these workers. From early in the century, combined organisation had been strictly illegal. The Gag Act criminalised the sort of oath of allegiance characteristic of membership of such an organisation. And legislation also disallowed the combination of workers with a view to collectively forcing employers to increase wages or shorten hours of work.

But 1871 Gladstone - following the report of a Royal Commission - gave some legal recognition to trades unions. He forbade any sort of picketing, however. Four years later Disraeli made picketing, as long as it was non-violent, lawful: and in 1876 he effectively legalised mass strike action, opening the way to a growth of trade unions that had never before been possible.

This also led to a great growth in the early stages of a labour movement independent of the established parties. As Reynold's Newspaper declared in 1875, 'the working classes did very much for Mr. Gladstone in the election of 1868, and what had been their reward? Mr Gladstone made use of his great majority to rule for the benefit of the middle class and to conserve the interests of the higher classes. What the order of labour should do is to get their own candidates ready - their own men, men of their own order - who will keep clear of the intrigues of both parties'.

A central concern of this developing movement was the land question. Debate relating to land-reform, whether in the shape of the taxation of land values or even public ownership of the land, had been common currency among working-class and middle-class radicals since the days of the Chartists in the 1840s. The Land and Labour League had been formed in 1869. A year later, the Land Tenure Reform Association had been established, to urge that the 'unearned increase of the land' should properly be the possession of society as a whole.

Nine years after that, the publication of the American Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* further stimulated the debate. The book sold in huge numbers - around 100,000 copies - and George was arrested when he subsequently toured Ireland to promote his central thesis that all taxation should be abolished except a tax on

the rental income of land. A year later the Democratic Federation was formed, advocating land nationalisation. Four years later still, with the affiliation of the Scottish Land and Labour League and the Labour Emancipation League, the federation took the name by which it would henceforth be known: the Social Democratic Federation. And then, of course, there was the Highland Land Law Reform Association.

The Highlands themselves, meantime, had witnessed the development of an extensive steamer service, linking the western mainland coast with the inner and outer Hebrides and with Glasgow. The railway too connected many parts of the mainland by the end of the century. The line from London via Edinburgh and Perth had made its way to Inverness and Invergordon by 1863. By 1870, Dingwall was linked to Strome Ferry, with its steamer connection onwards to Skye. Four years later, there was a link north to Wick and Thurso. And shortly after the turn of the century, the line from Glasgow to Fort William had been extended to Mallaig. Links with the wider world were also serviced on a seasonal basis, whether in the form of migration in the wake of the herring fisheries, or in the form of agricultural and domestic service in the southern counties and towns of Scotland.

By the early 1880s, therefore, the common people of the Highlands could draw on an extensive tradition of land agitation; a shorter tradition of victory in this agitation; a national audience in the form of Lord Napier's commission into their grievances; an extensive network of supporters in the developing labour movement in the southern cities; and a leadership that united agitators on the ground (MacPherson of Glendale) with the Celtic intelligentsia (Blackie of Edinburgh University) and progressive parliamentarians (Fraser-

MacIntosh). They could also draw on the support of much, if not all, of the general press in the south.

The importance of this support was not overlooked. Later in the decade, for instance, a protestor 'threatened to baptise' a reporter with a basin of toilet slops, but someone else restrained her, saying, 'they would be glad to see reporters among them at any time'. Nor should the close links between some of the local agitators and the sympathetic press be overlooked either. In one trial later in the decade, it became apparent that a key witness worked as a stringer for the Scotsman, the Glasgow Herald, the Inverness Courier and the Press Association. (In the spring of the following year, this same witness launched the short-lived Lewisman - the first-ever paper in the Western Isles). During the same trial, it became clear that the Land League leader Donald MacRae also reported on a regular basis for the Scottish Leader and the North British Daily Mail.

Important above all, however, was the agitational and organisational role of John Murdoch's Highlander and Alexander MacKenzie's Celtic Magazine.

From the very first issue, Murdoch's paper had demonstrated a clear vision of the Highlands and the proper place of the Highlands in a progressive Scotland. The themes covered by the Highlander included the importance of Gaelic (to which it gave a considerable amount of space), affairs in parliament and the game laws; but above all, the land laws and the relations between crofter and landlord. The second edition carried a long and vituperative editorial on evictions. Within weeks every issue was carrying articles on the game laws, letters against deer forests, and editorials on the land question. The paper covered the Clearances at length, and from the

beginning gave space to Blackie on the land question, while throughout its first year a torrent of articles, editorials and letters found space on these same central themes. One typical issue, for example, carried substantial pieces on resistance to evictions on Tiree and on conditions for crofters inside a deer forest, along with scrutiny of the machinations of titled Highland landlords in the House of Lords.

Further pieces reported on the Gaelic bards and the Clearances, evictions on Mull and Iona, and - of course - the victorious dispute on Bernera on the west side of Lewis. Events on Skye were also covered, between long and combative editorials on the pressing need for land-reform, and trenchant criticism of the prevailing legal relations between landlords and their crofting tenants. The mid-1870s also saw the first of many highly critical articles on the state of affairs on the Gordon estates in South Uist. The conduct of Charles Fraser-MacIntosh in parliament and elsewhere was carefully and approvingly reported, as were the doings of Blackie and any others who chose to involve themselves in, or comment on, the land question.

Through the course of 1876, a full decade before the passage of any legislation in favour of the crofters, Murdoch kept up his agitation on the land question, and published detailed reports of Blackie's efforts to establish a chair of Celtic at Edinburgh University. Polemic, meanwhile, was engaged in every quarter. And no quarter was shown: in one issue the notoriously pro-landlord Scotsman was briskly dismissed as a paper characterised by its 'notorious, crawling and unscrupulous nature'. (Oddly enough, the marriage of Fraser-MacIntosh was also covered: which may - or

may not - have occasioned some editorial anguish over priorities, principles and space).

There were 'local notes' too, to this day the staple of many a local newspaper; and detailed reports on the doings of the numerous Highland societies at home and abroad. These included the likes of the Glasgow Gaelic Association, the San Francisco Caledonian Club, the Manchester Camanachd Club, the Sons of Scotland in Toronto, the Greenock Highland Society and - of course - the Gaelic Society of Inverness.

(The original members of the Federation of Celtic Societies included: the Gaelic Society of London; the Gaelic Society of Inverness; the Birmingham Highland Society; the Aberdeen Gaelic Society; Edinburgh University's Celtic Society; Greenock's Highland Society; Greenock Ossianic Club; Tobermory Gaelic Society; and a number of Glasgow-based district societies, including those of Skye, Islay, Sutherland, Cowal, Lewis, Mull and Ardnamurchan. The Liverpool Highland Society was also a member).

Murdoch's energy appears never to have slackened, nor his firmness of purpose. The Highlander, he editorialised, was an 'irresistable power for good in the land'. And though the simultaneous possession of talent and ambition is not, in the newspaper editor, as common as is sometimes supposed, Murdoch had talent and selfless ambition in abundance. For instance, a month after increasing the number of pages by a third and moving from a tabloid to broadsheet format, he announced with an authority that rings strangely down the years, 'there is no good reason why the Highlander should not have the largest circulation of any newspaper in Scotland'.

Above all, perhaps, Murdoch had an instinctive understanding of the dynamics of political campaigning. As early as January 1878, the Highlander could report with a prophetic resonance that the Greenock Highland Society was calling for a royal commission into the condition of the crofters in the Highlands: a demand that, at the time, must have seemed absurd. But the same stray call was to harden over time, to become the central demand of the crofters' movement, taken up and promoted strongly by MacKenzie in his Celtic Magazine into the 1880s.

In early 1882 MacKenzie published, as a special broadsheet-format supplement, a report on the Federation of Celtic Societies' annual meeting, which was held at Perth. Coverage of the Edinburgh Sutherland Association followed, as well as a short piece by John MacKay on the Sutherland evictions, a mention on the Gaelic census in Scotland, a comment on the Skye crofters and the press, and a long piece on social unrest in that island.

Just a month later the magazine was covering the Battle of the Braes: and the agitation for which both Murdoch's Highlander and MacKenzie's Celtic Magazine had so long campaigned was truly under way - with an energy, perhaps, that neither Murdoch nor MacKenzie could have hoped for just a few years earlier. And within another year, Napier's commission had arrived in Braes to open its work, precisely as the Greenock Highland Society had demanded five years earlier.

Throughout the course of the commission's tour, MacKenzie kept up a relentless barrage of propaganda. In May, the Celtic Magazine covered the gaoling in Edinburgh of three Glendale crofters. It quoted the Greenock Telegraph: 'The judges are obliged to act upon statutes framed by a class in their own interests.'

Nobody thinks any the worse of the poor men who are now in prison. They were loudly cheered as they left the dock. Their families will be well seen to - in spite of the Scotsman's sneers at their friends - while they remain in custody; and they will be certain to get a warm welcome from the public when the day of liberation arrives'.

MacKenzie himself had visited the three men in the city's Calton Gaol and had found them in good spirits. He reported that 'they were much delighted at the enlivenment of their evenings by frequently hearing the bagpipes in the neighbourhood playing familiar airs'. This was, MacKenzie added with admirable panache, 'an arrangement by their Edinburgh friends of a remarkably considerate and delicate nature'.

It was against this background, then, with this sort of encouragement, that the land agitation flourished as never before across the Highlands in the early 1880s.

When the Glendale men gaoled in Edinburgh for breach of interdict were freed, they were met by a crowd of 1,000 supporters along with two pipers. That same evening John MacPherson travelled north by train for Strome Ferry and thence by steamer to Portree, in the cause of getting to Glendale in time to give evidence before the Napier Commission. Off Braes, on the way into Portree, he could see bonfires blazing and flags flying by way of welcome back to the island. At the pier in Portree, his steamer was met by a large crowd of supporters, and MacPherson later told them that he believed that 'the imprisonment of the Glendale crofters has done more to remove landlord tyranny and oppression from Skye than anything which had happened during the present century'.

Later that month the Highland Land Law Reform Association (HLLRA) branch in Inverness thanked the General Assembly of the Free Church for its (progressive) views on the crofters' cause. And in London a Land Law Reform Association meeting, with Blackie and D.H. MacFarlane on the platform, passed resolutions 'regretting that no representative of the crofters had been placed on the commission, and declaring that no alteration of the Land Laws would give permanent satisfaction which did not give the Highlanders a permanent footing on the soil'.

Meanwhile, the Scotsman was claiming manipulation of the commission by outside agitators. It was a claim strongly denied by MacKenzie, who nevertheless turned it to advantage in terms of publicity, for which he clearly had a significant talent. Murdoch too was accused by the Scotsman of complicity in Irish politics and of having taken Irish money to buy dynamite. Though he denied the charge the Scotsman, as he later confided to his diary, 'never withdrew its accusation, nor in any way made amends for its foul attack on me'.

None of this, however, appeared to dissuade crofters from giving such evidence as they chose before the commission - though in at least one case the landlord in question formally and publicly refused to undertake not to victimise witnesses for what they might say. MacKenzie noted, 'whatever may be the outcome of its labours the commission has already done unspeakable good, by exposing the evils of Highland estate management to the world'. And a few months later he would add, in a notice carried by the hundredth edition of the Celtic Magazine (to the effect that he would shortly begin publication of a new title, the Scottish Highlander): 'The real work of those who demand and will insist upon a change in the

present Land Laws will only begin in earnest when the nature of the Royal Commission's report is known'.

Meanwhile, fired in part by the energising effect on communal consciousness of the evidence to the commission, and the huge publicity that it generated, the agitation was going from strength to strength - as the landlords and authorities had initially feared. There was continuing trouble in Lewis, with the Melbost crofters taking over Lady Matheson's links and driving away her tenant-farmer's sheep. When the factor returned the sheep, they were again driven away: and her ladyship turned to the Court of Session for action against thirty-three of the men said to have been involved.

In the Uists there was continuing trouble too. From Lochboisdale it was reported that meetings were being widely held and widely attended, that flags of defiance and revolt were flying in nearly every township, and that at Stoneybridge the people were threatening to seize land for cultivation. In Skye also, the attitude of the crofters, 'in their opposition to all constituted authority', was as determined 'and defiant as during the last outbreak', according to one of many similar reports.

At Leckmelm, in defiance of a Court of Session order, crofters invaded the property by boats and sailed them away loaded with landlordly seaweed. Legal proceedings were at once initiated. And from Tiree came the report: 'The land question forms the chief topic of discussion on the island at the present time. While opinions differ as to the ultimate results of the agitation, it is generally entertained that the crofters now mean business. On Saturday night a considerable number marched in a body to Island House to ascertain of the factor whether a certain one of their number had paid his rent lately. Our sheriff-officer stands in actual danger of

bodily harm should he attempt the performance of his duties. The crofters threaten to take forcible possession of Ben Hynish and Ben Hough as grazing grounds’.

Police reports from across the Highlands indicated the same depth of popular feeling, resolve and ambition. On Skye, according to the Chief Constable, meetings had been held at Broadford, Waternish and Fairy Bridge in one week alone. In Broadford, John MacPherson addressed sixty crofters and announced, ‘that the time had now arrived when the crofters should unite together and agitate their cause for freedom and more land, and by doing so they would be sure to succeed’.

At that meeting alone, fifty crofters joined the Land League. And three days later the police constable in Waternish was reporting that, ‘a meeting of the HLLRA was held by the Rev. Donald MacCallum, Waternish, within the Established Church, Waternish, on Friday. The meeting was attended by about thirty of the crofters of Waternish: but none was admitted to the meeting except those who became members of the association. There is a report current here today that a mass meeting of the crofters of the parishes of Duirinish, Bracadale and Snizort is to be held at Fairy Bridge on Tuesday’.

Four days later, John MacPherson addressed a Land League meeting at Flashadder. The same afternoon, he and MacCallum had spoken to 800 men and women who had gathered at Fairy Bridge, from the districts of Edinbane, Waternish, Dunvegan and Bracadale.

By then, League membership was growing rapidly on Skye. MacPherson had been earlier in the south on League business. He returned to Skye via Glasgow - where he addressed, from the

window of his railway carriage in Queen Street station, and in Gaelic, a crowd of well-wishers - at at once plunged into the agitation on the island, and elsewhere in the north. In August he spoke to 2,000 Highlanders at Fraserburgh for the summer herring fishing. By that December, as president of what the authorities saw as a 'Fenian fraternity' (that is, the Glendale branch of the Land League), he was opening its first meeting in the local school-house. In the new year, fifty men of Dunvegan met to form their own local branch: and the Oban Times reported in February that 'branch societies of this new mode of agitating crofters' grievances are now in full swing'.

That same month the Land Law Reform Association of London issued, in English and Gaelic, an appeal to the public and the crofters. It urged the support of the former for land-reform. To the latter, its advice was, 'your first duty now is to form as soon as possible Associations, through which you could speak and act and make your grievances known. In forming a district association, you might first convene a public meeting to discuss your affairs, resolve that an Association be formed, and appoint a provisional secretary and small committee. Then, the townships included in the district might each, under the direction of the committee, choose representatives, and these representatives, at a convenient time and place, might meet to frame a constitution and elect office-bearers. An organisation embracing the whole of the Highlands should be aimed at'.

The Oban Times reported a Glasgow meeting of the Scottish Land Restoration League, at which 'thousands were unable to attend admission', and covered the formation of branches of the Land League throughout Mull. It also reported the London

'headquarters' demanding 'such changes in the Land Laws as will secure fair rents, durability of tenure, and compensation for improvements, with such an apportionment of the land as will promote the welfare of the people'.

In April, the Stenscholl branch of the League met at a township in the possession of a farmer described as being a 'land shark of no small voracity'. According to Norman Stewart of Valtos, it was necessary to agitate more loudly and more unitedly still. At this meeting, 'all the speeches were enthusiastically cheered throughout', while there were 'interruptions of a very uncomplimentary nature about the lairds, factors, and tacksmen. This is a fair specimen of what is going on in almost every township in the West'.

A month later, a speaker from the Scottish Land Restoration League was in Skye with arrangements made for him to speak at Dunvegan, Waternish, Glendale, Valtos, Uig, Portree and Braes. As the Oban Times reported, 'the movement is carried on with almost incredible enthusiasm and determination. Meetings are being held at regular intervals, and speeches delivered that would do credit to a member of parliament'. There were further reports of agitation across the Highlands, from Barra, Strath in Skye, Loch Eport, Loch Alsh, from Lewis, and across the mainland. In June, the HLLRA of London heard its secretary report that it now had 29 branches and 5,000 members; while a month later the Edinburgh association was preparing to amalgamate its branches with London.

By then, police reports from Inverness-shire were recording a Land League meeting at Fort William - 'which meeting was addressed by a man named John MacDonald, native of Uig, Isle of Skye, the property of Fraser of Kilmuir. He spoke in strong terms

against the existing land laws'. A month later, police reports were noting Professor Blackie's seditious presence on Skye, in the dangerous company of Donald MacFarlane. On one evening of the tour, they each spoke at a meeting in Portree. Blackie strongly advised the people 'to keep up the agitation as hot as possible and not to fear landlord or factor, and that he himself would not die until he would see the rights of the poor established and the landlords done away with'.

And a month later John MacPherson, MacCallum and the secretary of the London HLLRA were also touring Skye, along with delegates from Uist. At Skeabost they addressed a meeting of 150 crofters (and one police spy, suitably disguised as per the suggestions of the Procurator Fiscal). MacCallum offered, as usual, a benediction on the gathering, after which the speakers addressed the crofters in Gaelic. MacCallum thereafter retired to an 'unknown place' (in the words of, and to the chagrin, or relief, of the police spy) for a private meeting with local crofters' leaders.

In Argyll too the agitation grew throughout the spring and the summer of 1884. John MacPherson spent a month there, helping to form branches of the League at Easdale, Salen, Tobermory, Bunessan, Creich, Iona, Tiree, Lismore, Lochaline, Strontian, Ardnamurchan, Taynuilt and Oban. At the Easdale meeting, 400 people turned out to hear him. At Lochaline, 100 were present, 'which may be considered a large turnout for such a sparsely populated district'. On Luing, 'the whole audience showed their readiness to join the association'. In Salen, 'almost every man present agreed to become a member'. And on Lismore, 'on a motion being put to the meeting for a show of hands on the side of the HLLRA, all hands were up in an instant'.

From Barra, it was reported that 'the advent of Mr MacFarlane and Professor Blackie is held in high esteem', while in Shetland hundreds of fishermen met to demand land-reform, 'many of whom are crofters from Skye, Lewis, Caithness, Sutherland and Argyll, presently engaged in the herring fishing here'. On Iona most of the householders' were members, 'and those who had not previously joined intimated their intentions of doing so at once, so that these districts may be considered as rapidly ripening for the great struggle'. At Strontian, 'a large proportion of those present enrolled'. At Lochaline, the motion to form a branch was accepted unanimously. And in Kilchoan, while a large meeting heard MacPherson, there were repeated requests that he return to the district in the near future.

In the spring of 1884 the Napier Commission finally reported. In essence, it proposed to institutionalise large-scale crofting townships operated on a communal basis, and to abolish small-scale crofts under half-a-dozen acres. Whatever the merits of the details of the report, it implicitly conceded the case for a thoroughgoing reform of the land system in the Highlands. Thus the government, willingly or otherwise, confronted the prospect of having to legislate, in some way or another, on the crofters' grievances: while at the beginning of September the HLLRA met at Dingwall in national conference.

By any standards it was an impressive gathering. But by the standards of hitherto-existing class relations in the Highlands, until so recently unchallenged on anything other than a local scale, it was surely an extraordinary gathering. Branches and associations came together on a national scale: from the county associations of Ross-shire, Inverness-shire, Argyll and Sutherland, as well as from

Edinburgh and London. Along with representatives from the Scottish Farmers' Alliance and the Scottish Land Restoration League, there were crofters' delegates from Lewis, Halladale, Strathy, Forres, Grantown, Lochalsh, Skye (of the island's thirteen delegates, three came from Kilmuir), Culbokie, Resolis, Evanton, Inverness, Strathpeffer, Gairloch, Kintail, both North and South Uist, and Caithness.

Individuals in attendance read like a roll-call of those had who had been active in the agitation on a national scale - Blackie, Fraser-MacIntosh, Donald MacCallum, Alexander MacKenzie, John MacPherson, Donald MacFarlane and Michael Buchanan of Barra. And there were others who had also played a role outwith the Highlands, or who shortly would do so in parliament - Charles Cameron, MP, Dr. Clark, the next constituency candidate for Caithness, Dr. MacDonald, who had recently stood for the crofters' cause in a Ross-shire by-election, Donald Murray of the London HLLRA, John MacKay of Hereford, Dugul Cowan of the Edinburgh HLLRA, and Angus Sutherland of Glasgow.

The conference rejected the proposals of the Napier Commission, demanded the compulsory enlargement of crofters' holdings, and called for the law to be changed in favour of crofters with regard to deer forests and the game laws. It was agreed to publish a newspaper for the movement: and above all, it was decided to run candidates for parliament.

Ten years on from the Bernera riot, the crofters' movement had made extraordinary advances - to the hostility of the pro-crofter press. The Times, for instance, 'could only characterise the whole proceedings as a piece of pernicious nonsense', and 'could anticipate nothing but mischief from a policy of public agitation'.

Despite the strictures of the Times, however, the Highlands were on the brink of a period of agitation fiercer than anything that had gone before. As MacKenzie himself had written just two years earlier, in the circular of the Inverness branch of the HLLRA: 'All that is wanted to make it a real power for good in the land is that those who believe in its object should at once enrol themselves among its members'. And by the autumn of 1884, membership was widespread in the crofting counties, while in Skye the rent-strike weapon was increasingly popular.

The report of a government agent, one McNeill, sent north to report later in the decade, is eloquent witness to the state of agitation in the Highlands in these years. From Skye, for instance, he would record that: 'The teachings of the Land League seem to have penetrated to every district. It is probable that every man of the crofter and cottar classes, with many merchants and artisans beside, is an enrolled member. Open dissentients are now rare, and even those who still profess independence are secretly anticipating a future when the landlords and the tacksmen shall have disappeared from the island'.

The story was the same on Harris, in the Uists and on Barra: 'The individuals occupied in arousing agitation are the same whose names occur so frequently on the other side of the Minch. The doctrines preached by these persons are all but universally accepted in Barra. As to the other islands, the mass of the population continue fully in sympathy with the movement. The truth, I believe to be, is that Land Leagueing is as popular in Harris and North Uist as it is in Barra, but that the latter island enjoys the services of a specially active local secretary. Thus the population of

South Uist are probably prepared for mischief when opportunity occurs, as also those of Benbecula’.

From Lewis, McNeill’s secret report was particularly alarming. He had conferred, he reported, with the factor for Lady Matheson, but had otherwise concealed from everyone his purpose in visiting the island, on the factor’s advice. The facts disclosed by the factor were so important that he could not delay in forwarding them: ‘All the cottars, squatters and young men in Lewis, especially those belonging to the Naval Reserve, are members of the League. The first emissaries who visited the district seem to have been Messrs. Murdoch (late of the Highlander) and MacKenzie (of the Celtic Magazine). The next public meeting was held in October 1884, when Messrs. MacIver, MacCallum (Waternish), MacPherson (Glendale) and several local agitators were present. Outrages have been numerous. I am led to the conclusion that it is the deliberate intention of the people to deprive Lady Matheson of the whole revenue derived from sporting rents’.

On the mainland and in the inner islands, McNeill thought the movement less numerous than in the Hebrides. But still, ‘it appears to have attained a firm hold of the people in Sutherlandshire, Ardnamurchan, Tiree and some parts of Mull’. There seemed, he said, to have been ‘hardly a parish on the coast which was not visited by the same active emissaries whose names so frequently occur in the islands, viz. Messrs. MacCallum, MacKenzie and Murdoch, and John MacPherson’.

On Mull, and in the general area, the movement was especially active on Tiree, the Ross of Mull and Iona, with influential branches at Salen and Dervaig. In Ardnamurchan, ‘the whole population belongs and forms one of the centres of its greatest

activity'. In McNeill's view, this was because Donald MacCallum's brother was minister at Strontian.

And in Arisaig, where the bulk of the crofter's evidence to the Napier Commission had largely been given by Donald MacCallum, the head stalker explained to McNeill that the numbers of members probably did not exceed fifty in Arisaig and Morar. 'But the great bulk of the population were in sympathy. The first agitators here were the Rev. Donald MacCallum (now of Waternish) and Mr. Aeneas MacDonnell of Morar. Mr Murdoch was also here, and Mr. Alexander MacKenzie of Inverness'.

According to the Arisaig doctor too, 'it may be said that every man of the crofter and cottar class is a Land Leaguer, either actually a member, or in sympathy with the League. The Rev. Donald MacCallum (now of Waternish, then a minister here) was the first agent of the League. Mr. Murdoch was also here'. But with the exception of the Oban Times no incendiary literature was circulated: 'There was no need for coercion, as the sympathy was general'.

Northwards too, along the western seaboard, McNeill found the same conditions prevailing. In Lochbroom, the sub-factor at Ullapool for the Duchess of Sutherland reported that the people 'are thoroughly imbued' with the principles of the League, and 'believe that the land is justly theirs and that rent is an unjust action. Extreme newspapers are also circulated in the district'.

From Ullapool, the local police sergeant claimed that 'the whole population is in sympathy' with the Land League'. And from Inverewe, strong support for the agitation was reported in the district of Gairloch and Gruinard Bay. In Gairloch, 'the League has a strong hold on the people here, especially the younger people, and numbers probably 150 enrolled members, with a regular

organisation, a chairman, and a secretary. Mr. Alexander MacKenzie was the first to bring Land League teaching here, and being a native of the parish, he was listened to. John MacPherson (Glendale) also addressed a meeting, and advised no rent’.

From Applecross, the minister there told McNeill, ‘There is a regular Land League organisation, with president and secretary. There was and is a good deal of sympathy with Land League doctrines’. From Loch Carron it was reported that ‘practically the whole crofter and cottar population are Land Leaguers. The active members are mostly the young men’. At Lochinver, McNeill spoke to the wife of the local Free Church minister. ‘The League has complete hold on the people in Sutherlandshire, and she knows hardly any exception among her neighbours’. Her husband believed that ‘the League has great hold of the people’, while extreme views were increasingly being circulated at its meetings. The police constable from Lochinver also reported, ‘the Land League is universally favoured by crofters and cottars throughout the county. There is a considerable circulation of Land League literature, both newspapers and leaflets, which impress on the people that they have a right to the land’.

And in the closing months of 1884, the people of the Highlands thus showed signs of simply taking possession of the land they believed by rights to be their land. Scarcely had the Dingwall conference of the League ended but the crofters in South Uist were in open conflict with Lady Gordon Cathcart. At Grogary, one of her ladyship’s fields was seized forcibly by the crofters. Gordon’s cattle were driven away, and crofters’ stock replaced them. Furthermore, ‘on Saturday an attempt was made to waylay Mr. MacLennan, the factor of the estate, and he only escaped injury by a most friendly

warning': while just a week later, the local press was reporting 'a most malicious outrage' in South Uist.

Within a week of the Dingwall conference, Donald MacFarlane had arrived on Tiree, and at Baugh he convened a 'monster meeting' of crofters. He was welcomed ashore by Neil MacNeill, delegate of the crofters from the east of the island. MacNeill would also welcome ashore John MacPherson, who was touring with MacFarlane. And a week later, feeling was running high in the outer isles, with MacCallum and John MacPherson touring Benbecula, South Uist and Barra: at Stoneybridge they were met by pipers and flag-waving supporters. A growing number of minor cases of arson, under cover of darkness, was reported as well.

By the end of the month, the Oban Telegraph could report that, 'in Skye the centres of agitation are at Glendale, in the parish of Duirinish, and Eastside in Kilmuir. To all appearances the agitation is becoming intensified, and extending; and deeds have been done with impunity for some time back which would not be tolerated for a day in other parts of the country, deeds of malice and lawlessness. Since so many officers of the law have been thrashed and beaten in these districts with impunity, no hope of enforcing legal action can be seriously entertained, and it is becoming proverbial that there is no law on Skye'.

And from south Uist the same report noted, 'many acts of shameful mischief have recently been committed. The outlook now is most discouraging'. From Mull, by the end of September, the League was reported to be operating with vigour at Salen and other centres of population. It had created 'an amount of interest and excitement on the land question', which was unknown before. 'Fuel has undoubtedly been heaped on a smouldering fire, and if proper

remedies are not forthcoming, it will burst forth with volcanic fierceness over the length and the breadth of the Highlands’.

In October, men in south Uist expropriated yet another of Lady Gordon Cathcart’s fields. In Kilmuir, the crofters resolved to withhold payment of rent, and to subscribe to a legal fund for their defence in the event of proceedings being taken against them. Unanimously, it was also agreed to boycott the factor: and it was made known that any crofter who chose not to support the League in this matter could expect the destruction of his property.

From Lewis, meanwhile, came the news that ‘the land agitation has reached a very acute and critical stage’. In the parish of Uig, the crofters of practically every township were on rent strike, and though the factor had toured for a week attempting to collect rent, he had returned home without a penny. By mid-October, land-seizure was well-advanced in Uig, with the crofters having possession of the holdings of large farmers, and refusing even to meet the authorities to discuss land seizures. As the Oban Telegraph reported, ‘respect for law and order has for some time past been at a discount in the island. But the open and avowed renunciation of all authority and government which now prevails is only of recent date’.

In South Uist too, the land question was ‘fast becoming the all-absorbing one here. The agitation seems to be spreading rapidly, and is taking shape in a very determined way’. And from Skye: ‘In all probability the land agitation in this island may well soon reach its climax. In the two most disaffected areas, matters are surely coming to a crisis’.

In Glendale, by mid-October, some of the men interdicted two years earlier had again taken over landlords’ land. All crofters, it

was reported, had been instructed to put their stock on the field in question. Those who did not were subject to the attentions of a League delegation. So too were any who did not attend Land League meetings. The miller at Kilmuir, having defaulted on a League meeting, found his corn stacks scattered to the wind; while from throughout the island, reports indicated that the land-seizing phase of the agitation was only just getting into its stride.

By the end of October, the sixty-strong Glendale branch of the League was 'prospering greatly', and meeting weekly. In Barra, the people were 'extremely interested' in the question of land reform; 'wherever two or three are gathered together, one may safely wager that the land is the subject of conversation'. At the beginning of November, the new style of agitation was spreading like wildfire on Skye: 'Deeds of lawlessness such as seizing proprietors' land, placing stock on the same, intimidating shepherds from interfering with such stock, scattering corn stacks, and burning peat-stacks of crofters who do not join the land association, and assault upon such, are becoming altogether too frequent to be put up with much longer. In Glendale, crofters have placed stock on the farms of Waterstein and Scor, and propose ploughing old arable land in the proprietor's hands, all of them to sow a given quantity of seed in the same, first spring, and divide the produce in the following autumn. Wilder schemes are discussed, and deeds that would shock the people some ten years ago are now coolly proposed'.

And in Lewis by November, some 400 crofters in Uig were more firmly than ever on rent strike: and lands had been seized from the estate and from the large farmers. One one occasion, the farmer attempted to put stock on some of the occupied land. Over a hundred men removed his stock, and threatened violence should he

persist. In Lochs, there was also a rent-strike in progress, and so well-organised was the agitation that those who privately claimed a willingness to pay their rent did not dare do so, for fear of popular retribution.

By the middle of the same month, all non-crofting grazing land in Uig had been occupied. In Lochs no-rent proclamations had been issued from the townships of Crossbost, Raernish, Luerbost, Calbost, Marvig, Limervaig and Gravir. In Gravir, one man was declared outcase and boycotted, for having paid his rent. During the second week of the month, the boundary dyke between the farm of Orinsay and the townships of Gravir and Limervaig was destroyed by bands of men.

At least on the face of it, then, by the autumn of 1884, the Highlands were on the brink of something approaching open insurrection. For the government authorities in general, some sort of action was a matter of increasing urgency.

And as these authorities delayed, so the agitation - and those growing expectations of a crofters' millennium - continued to grow too.