

PREFACE

'My people have been on this land for centuries. It is our land, and we mean to have our land'.

THE SUBJECT of this book is the record of opposition to landlordism - and the political and cultural overtones associated with that opposition - which characterises so much of the last two hundred and fifty years of Scottish Highland history.

This record is put in a modern context. The first chapter of the book considers landlord-centred disputes from the 1970s and 1980s while the final chapter examines some similar disputes from the 1990s. The intervening chapters concern themselves broadly with the story of anti-landlordism from the aftermath of the final Jacobite rising to the Knoydart land-raid in 1948.

This record is discontinuous and the focus on it, of the text, is therefore discontinuous too. But the effort is made, so far as is possible, to put those people involved in the anti-landlord tradition at the centre of their own history. This is not a point of view which would have recommended itself to all writers on Scottish affairs in earlier times.

As early as the 1730s, with the ink scarcely dry on the Treaty of Union, George Buchanan's Latin histories of Scotland were alleged as unfit to be 'put in the hands of our Scotch youth while at school, now there is an Union between the two Kingdoms, for fear of awakening that Old National Grudge, that should now be sopited [suppressed as discreditable] and industriously forgotten'.

In the second half of the same century the government's censors extended this animosity to the theatre. The Lord

Chamberlain's office refused a licence for the performance of Duval's Prince Charles Stuart, for instance, and granted permission only to plays which portrayed the Scots as quaint pastoralists or comic characters, and which ridiculed Scottish manners, character and speech.

And by the middle of the following century, with the Knoydart Clearances satisfactorily completed, the Times could assert that 'Scotland is a country manifestly in want of a grievance. She labours under the weariness of attained wishes and the curse of granted prayers. Good fortune has joined her inseparably to the richest and most enterprising nation of modern times. Never was a territory north of Latitude 55 Degrees so favoured before'.

An echo of these sentiments is still found with reference to the modern Highlands. Consider a humorous item in the Daily Telegraph Peter Simple column from the autumn of 1981.

'Clackies, as these small, tough unusually ferocious dogs are called in Scotland, tend to bight anyone they can get at on sight. They were formerly used by landlords' agents to evict crofters in the West Highlands. A couple of Clackies down the chimney would soon have the crofters and their families outside and running for their lives'.

This item was judged so excessively funny that, with admirable economy of effort, it was reprinted fifteen months later in the same column: 'In the days of the Highland clearances, they were used by landlords' agents for evicting obstinate crofters. A couple of Clackies down the chimney had the wretches out in seconds, running for their lives in the direction of the nearest port where they might hope to get a boat for Nova Scotia'.

This same sort of pertinaciously generous humour was detectable at the Isle of Eigg 'Games' in 1984. The festivities commenced the evening prior to the Games themselves with a cricket-match (for which the proper gear and costume was plentifully supplied) on that island beach where once the Norsemen hauled their longships for easy respite from the Minch, and across which at dusk cries rang in tones appropriate to such spirit as these Games, in such a location, may be thought to represent.

The following morning, things got under way with a suitable seriousness.

'The McVaugh family had flown in from Philadelphia despite imminent business meetings in Tokyo and Paris. Distant German cousin Axel von Schellenberg had arrived that morning from Frankfurt, chartered a helicopter at Glasgow airport and landed on the croquet lawn. The Clanranalds (led by Ranald MacDonald, Chief of Clanranald and Hereditary Chief of the Western Isles) wore kilts during the windsurfing. The Great Eigg Campaign re-enacted the bloody struggles between the Hanoverians and the Jacobites. Barbour jackets and wine-bottles littered the verandah. Dimly I could see a figure under an enormous white pith helmet, standing in a jeep which proudly bore the Union Jack flag'.

Or consider the opinions attributed to an interviewee by Vogue magazine in the same recent period, and happily published without apparent thought given to the appropriate race-relations legislation. According to Vogue, the traditional [sic] west-Highlander was 'sloppy and dirty. They lie. They are fantasists with a babbling loquacity and an inability to look people in the eye'.

Or again, as another observer of this 'traditional' Highland scene in 1990 counselled in a local newspaper its indigent readers:

'Local people do not want to work. They are unreliable. It is outsiders who achieve things here, not your Highlanders and Islanders. Be less anti-English, without us you would have drifted off into the Atlantic by now'.

And yet, and yet: the record of popular struggle, of popular aspiration to some sort of cultural and national integrity, will not lie down, will not be written, or humoured, or patronised, out of its own history. Many Highland writers have born witness in recent years, and in a very direct way, to this tradition of struggle.

The poet and cultural-historian Derick Thomson is one of those.

'There was a small inner harbour behind my grandfather's house on which the Established Church was built. It was here that the Rev. Donald MacCallum, the famous Land Leaguer, preached to his small flock, and my grandfather acted as precentor, though he never committed himself sufficiently to join the Church. He and MacCallum were good friends. MacCallum had a large glebe and ran it as a farm with the help of his brother Dughall. Later this glebe was raided and the village of Keose Glebe built on it. One of the raiders was my uncle Willie, and my grandfather must have derived real satisfaction from seeing his youngest son staking his claim to Keose land that had been denied himself so many years before'.

The folklorist Calum MacLean wrote of his meeting with a former anti-landlord activist from Sutherland.

'Hector Sutherland is one of the few surviving Gaelic speakers in the district and a most intelligent and discerning old gentleman. In his younger and more active days he was prominent during the time of the crofter and Land League agitation'.

James Shaw Grant, for many years editor of the Stornoway Gazette, also recalled a similar meeting.

‘I remember as a young university student meeting one of the leaders of the Sutherland crofters of that era. Joseph MacLeod from Kildonan was a very old man by that time, but still active and full of fun. He looked like an Old Testament patriarch. My uncle spoke of him almost with reverence because of his standing in the north during the Crofters’ War. His technique was to go to a village, call a meeting, and deliver an address. He could then send an account of the meeting to the local press, reporting his speech in full. Other nearby villages, not wanting to be undone, would invite him to speak to them, and the snowball - perhaps I should say fireball - of land-reform was rolling through the district’.

Many others, in the closing decades of the 20th century, could also claim a direct connection with the anti-landlord struggle of earlier times. John MacKay, who died as recently as 1989, could transmit in perfect detail the oral record of the destruction of his family’s community in Strathnaver in the early 19th century.

The poet Aonghas MacNeacail has recalled in print the story of his great-aunt’s imprisonment for her anti-landlord activities on Skye. The West Highland Free Press has reported that the piper at a Harris Sound wedding in 1976 was the same man as had played the pipes at the Balranald land-raid in 1919.

The Press and Journal has profiled another of the men who took part in that same raid, unrepentant at eighty-four years of age. Meanwhile, John MacCrae MacLellan has described in print memories of his grandfather John MacRae, secretary of the Ross-shire Land League. And Rob Gibson has established a direct link with the Land Leaguer Donald MacKay through his daughter Joan

Fraser, and with the Land Leaguer Donald MacRae through Alexander Robertson.

The West Highland Free Press has also told the story of Donald Beaton of Skye. He was just three years old, with his father in gaol in Inverness for Land League activities, when the remainder of his family were evicted from their home in Waternish.

The furniture was thrown out of the hovel and its entrance secured. Neighbours fed the family at night, though they could not offer shelter for fear of a similar fate: but Irish sailors on the coast at the time broke into the house and re-instated the family. Beaton died, as the paper recorded at the time, as recently as 1979.

And as late as the early 1980s, I myself interviewed a very elderly resident of Glencalvie. He could remember back to when he was a small boy and two of his neighbours were very elderly sisters - one of whom was crippled as a result of having been involved as a child in the famous Greenyards eviction riot of 1843.

In this respect, as in others, the land question in the Highlands is not just a matter of history. It remains a living issue for the Highlands, and the Scotland, of our own present times. This is so both in economic and cultural terms.

In a large and largely rural area like the Highlands, land-ownership could hardly fail to be a matter of economic importance. It significantly governs patterns of land use and land management (though good land management is never the exclusive property of any one form of land ownership). It governs issues such as crofting, ecological conservation and popular access to the 'wilderness area' that constitutes much of the Highlands.

This is not, of course, the only issue of importance in the Highland economy. Enterprise in a whole range of activities largely unconnected with the land is central to the Highland future. But the land cannot be ignored. And the past cannot be forgotten.

Nor should it be. The question of the ownership of the land in the Highlands is central to the cultural integrity of Scotland in this new century. Indeed, the long record of land-centred struggle in the Highlands may be said to have represented - in conditions of unassailable imperialist and unionist hegemony - a struggle, albeit by proxy, for precisely that cultural (and political) integrity.

In other words, a vibrant, democratic, culturally confident Scotland demands a modern and democratic system of land-ownership in the Highlands. The young Scottish Parliament can make that sort of framework available.

The rest is up to the people.

Iain Fraser Grigor. 2007.